Narrative and Community Crisis in *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) teems with violence. Morrison, who claims that “aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women,” has written that “there’s a special kind of... violence in writings by black women—not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless. Love, in the Western notion, is full of possession, distortion, and corruption. It’s a slaughter without the blood” (qtd. in Tate 122, 123). Toni Morrison acknowledges that the secrets of violence are safeguarded within the African American communities she writes about. She claims that she chose the first line of *The Bluest Eye*, “Quiet as it’s kept,” for its conspiratorial quality, for the phrase signified that between “black women conversing with each other” at the back gate, a “secret” was about to be shared, some “secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us,” a “conspiracy” both “held and withheld, exposed and sustained” (“Unspeakable Things” 21). The violent secret in *The Bluest Eye*, for example, is the secret of “illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible sex coming to its dreadful fruition” and the secret of a “pollution, . . . a skip, perhaps, in the natural order of things” (“Unspeakable Things” 21). Morrison’s *Beloved* discloses the “secrets ‘we’ shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community” (“Unspeakable Things” 21).

In *Beloved*, Morrison reveals that the violence within African American communities is originally imposed from outside by white oppressors, whose search for scapegoats translates into a similar search within the black community. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes how oppressed peoples, who have no other recourse, vent their frustration and anger on each other:

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If this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns in a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other. The different tribes fight between themselves since they cannot face the real enemy.

(Preface 18-19)

In *Beloved*, the community denies its propensity to focus its anger and humiliation on its weaker members. The community represses and is unable to identify the violence, white oppression, that is the root of its collapse and entrapment in cycles of violence. Consequently, *Beloved* labors to return to the more immediate origins of violence in the community, a system of slavery that pits members of the same community against each other, creating conflicts that must be reckoned with before the community can find peace in the present. Those horrors from the past constantly intrude on the text, dominating both it and the lives of Beloved’s characters, demanding that they be acknowledged and worked through as past.

*Beloved* departs from Morrison’s other novels in its willingness to identify slavery and white oppression as the roots of violence in African American communities. 1 Morrison depicts how, when a white man rides into Sethe’s yard to take her and her children back into slavery, she strikes out at one of her own, exerting herself in the only way possible in the face of the violence of slavery. She shows how Beloved’s murder continues a chain of reciprocal violence that entangles the community in the past and initiates a plot which is equally bound to the past. The community’s crisis of violence is reflected in a recursive narrative pattern, shaped out of repetitions and returns of the repressed memories of white violence in slavery. Through this recursive narrative, *Beloved* speaks the unspeakable secret of violence in the African American community.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard writes of communities embroiled in mimetic desire and reciprocal violence. In Girard’s terms, at the heart of the chaos in the community surrounding 124 Bluestone is a destructive desire to possess that which another possesses: underprivileged black communities desire the wealth, privilege, and status that the dominant white society possesses. Girard terms this desire “mimetic” (145-49). In *Beloved*, the African American community abandons its traditional values in favor of
those of the dominant culture. In Girard's schema, "mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict"; conflict invariably leads to violence (Violence 146). Violence breeds more violence as members of the community seek revenge, forging a chain of reciprocal violence.

Moreover, mimetic desire and cycles of reciprocal violence contribute to and are fueled by a breakdown of differences within the social order (Violence 49). Gender differences, differences in economic and social standing within the community, familial roles, and many other distinctions among members of the community help members of the community "maintain their 'identity,'" their particular place within the social structure: "'Degree' or gradus is the underlying principle of all order, natural and cultural. It permits individuals to find a place for themselves in society" (Violence 49-50). Girard observes that the breakdown of difference sometimes manifests itself in "deliberate violations of established laws and taboos" (Violence 119). Girard cites hierarchies within families and society overall, particularly relationships between children and parents and between servants and masters as examples of relationships affected by the crisis of difference.

Moreover, once mimetic desire has a foothold and violence has spread within the society, differences among members of the community evaporate as those members become rivals for privilege and as they become both victims and perpetrators of violence. Girard writes, "negative reciprocity, although it brings people into opposition with each other, tends to make their conduct uniform and is responsible for the predominance of the same" (Scapegoat 13-14). Girard asserts that "the antagonists caught up in the sacrificial crisis invariably believe themselves separated by insurmountable differences. In reality, however, these differences gradually wear away. . . . As the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into 'twins,' matching images of violence" (Violence 78-79). The resulting chain of reciprocal violence can be terminated only through sacrifice, or "pure" violence.

Within the communities Girard describes, the guilt bred by rampant violence is debilitating and must be expunged through sacrifice, an act of violence that is community-sanctioned and that reenacts the original act of violence. The scapegoat (sacrificial victim) functions to carry away the sins of the community and to suf-
fer exile or death without the fear of retaliation. Similarly, the community surrounding 124 Bluestone Road cannot hope to escape this chain of violence without addressing its root in oppression by the white society. Furthermore, the community must reexperience the originary violence in order to escape cycles of reciprocal violence.

Because originary violence within the community resembles a trauma that has been repressed and must be reenacted through sacrifice, the history of violence within the community is comparable to the process through which Freud’s analysands experience trauma, repress it, repeat it, and finally work through it in the psychoanalytic process. Patterns of behavior for the analysand continually “repeat” the original trauma; as a result, the present is dominated by repetitions of the past, and the difference between time present and time past is effaced. The analysand experiences the return of the repressed memory, perhaps even achieves awareness that the trauma is real in the past, yet never reexperiences or works through it (Beyond 149). According to Freud, “we may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (“Remembering” 12: 150). The analysand can break free of the pattern of repetition only through reproducing or reenacting the trauma as opposed to simply repeating it; the analysand must reexperience the trauma and its concomitant anxiety. Freud notes that “the process has no curative effect if, by some peculiar chance, there is no development of emotion. It is apparently these emotional processes upon which the illness of the patient and the restoration of health are dependent” (“Origin” 8).

A psychoanalytic narrative model is particularly appropriate and useful for a study of Morrison’s works and for relating Morrison’s thematic concerns to her narrative strategy, for, as she writes in playing in the dark, “the narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis” (v). Peter Brooks’ narrative dynamics, which emphasize trauma, repetition, and the crisis of difference, resemble Girard’s theory of violence and social dynamics within communities. Brooks writes that “plot starts. . . from that moment at which story, or ‘life,’ is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a ten-
sion, a kind of irritation which demands narration” (103). Brooks asserts that traditional narrative begins with “an inactive collapsed metaphor and works through to a reactivated, transactive one, a metaphor with its difference restored through metonymic process” (7). The metonymic process depends on the substitution, in a sequence, of a series of metonymies for the novel’s totalizing metaphor, with each metonymy representing a repetition of the novel’s metaphor. Together this sequence of metonymies constitutes the novel’s plot (29). The meanings we derive from these metonymies are “provisional”: “what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read” (23). In other words, “prior events, causes, are so only retrospectively, in a reading back from the end”(29). Those metonymies repeat some disruption of order that incites the narratable. To name the cause of the narrative would make the narrative itself unnecessary.

Brooks also suggests that

repetitions are. . . both returns to and returns of: for instance, returns to origins and returns of the repressed, moving us forward. . . toward elucidation, disillusion, and maturity by taking us back, as if in obsessive reminder that we cannot really move ahead until we have understood that still enigmatic past, yet ever pushing us forward, since revelation, tied to the past, belongs to the future. (125)

Brooks refers to these returns of the repressed as detours or deferrals of the forward-moving plot. The energies that serve to hold the plot together, to maintain it through deviance and detour, are the energies of the “textual hero’s career” and the energy of the reader’s desire for the end, or a return to quiescence (108). He suggests that plots move in two directions at once, both forward through the metonymic process and backward through repetitions that serve to return the narrative to its origins in trauma.

Brooks’ theory of narrative dynamics and Girard’s system of social dynamics depend on the repetition and reenactment of trauma. In Girard’s model, acts of reciprocal violence that repeat an originary act of violence (the original “trauma”) are comparable to the returns of the repressed for the analysand in Freud’s theory and to Brooks’ repetition through metonymic process. In each case, metonymies or substitutions are allied together by resemblance [and difference] to form plot, either the plot of the novel or
the “plot” of the history of violence within the community. The original violence of slavery might be said to be repeated in each instance of unsanctioned, reciprocal violence, just as incidents in the plot might be said to repeat an original trauma. Furthermore, in communities, each act of violence moves plot forward and backward: each is at once a detour, a return to the origins of violence within the community.

The novel, Brooks writes, must actually describe the experience of the original trauma before it can achieve closure and return the narrative to order, or “the non-narratable.” Similarly, sacrifice in a Girardean sense releases the community from violence. Sacrifice has been defined by Girard as the “reenactment of a ‘prior event,’” and “the ‘prior event’ that all ritual killings rationalize and represent in various ‘substitutions’ is a collective murder, an act of mob violence” (Violent Origins 8). In Girard’s terms, to gain some control over violence, an act of unanimously sanctioned violence, or sacrifice, must take place. And, to restore the narrative to the non-narratable, there must be what Brooks has termed “reproduction” or reenactment (124). For Brooks, there must be a repetition with a difference within the plot if difference is to be restored within the narrative. Thus, in both the community and in the analysand’s “text,” reproduction and sacrifice name the trauma, incorporating the past as past within the present. In Beloved, incidents in the plot metonymically repeat dominant white society’s oppression of black communities. This oppression must be named if the novel is to escape plot and the chain of metonymic repetitions. As is true of the narrative structure in Beloved, the community surrounding 124 Bluestone is concerned with finding a “cure” for violence. Both seek a return to order, a reinstatement of the difference(s) that has collapsed.

The differences within the narrative that reenactment and “sacrifice” attempt to restore have primarily to do with the degree of sameness and difference among incidents within the plot. Narrative difference also has to do with time, with the relative linearity or circularity of the plot. Within a recursive or circular plot, time present and time past lose their distinction as time past intrudes on time present. Beloved’s linear, forward movement is interrupted by repetitions and the return of the repressed. Within these detours, characters recount their pasts; they narrate the violence and trauma
that have driven them to perpetuate violence in the community. Beloved’s narrative struggles to reinstate the difference between the present and the past, thus escaping compulsive repetition of the past in the present. Narrative difference also involves the distinctions between narrative voices and the consciousnesses that are rendered in the texts. Often the identity of Beloved’s narrators becomes blurred, reflecting the crisis of difference within the text and within the novel’s community. It is difference on these levels that is restored when an incident in the plot can be said to reenact originary violence.

Beloved depicts both a narrative crisis and a communal one. Rather than confining white violence to the margins, as she does in her earlier works, in Beloved Morrison concentrates on exposing the atrocities of slavery as the origin of violence within the community around 124. Beloved’s desire to return to origins traps both community and text in cycles of repetition and reciprocal violence. According to Peter Brooks, in narrative, “the return to origins [leads] to the return of the repressed” (126). Beloved returns four centuries into the history of Africans in America to expose slavery as a primary source of violence within contemporary African American communities. By focusing on the horrors of slavery, Morrison offers a reenactment of originary violence that frees the community from reciprocal violence and the narrative from a crisis of difference and deferral.

In Beloved, Morrison clearly demonstrates how slavery places pressure on African American communities, pressure that, in the narrator’s words, creates in them “a new kind of whitefolks’ jungle” (199). Powerless to confront their oppressors, the community strikes out against equally powerless members of their own community. Thus, violence instigated by whites spreads within black communities of its own accord, perverting and twisting emotions. Morrison shows how the threat of white violence has conditioned former slaves not to attach themselves too strongly to the things they love. Within the “wonderful lie” of Sweet Home, the farm where he and Sethe had been slaves, Paul D says the only safe love was a “little love,” the only possibility was “loving small and in secret” (221). Within the context of slavery, where to love too fiercely is dangerous and potentially ruinous, Paul D believes that Sethe’s love is dangerous and “scary,” a “too thick love” (164).
The crisis in the community begins with Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe’s lost husband, and her overgenerous expression of love, the “reckless generosity on display at 124” (137). Baby Suggs’ “bounty” meets with community disapproval: “Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always at the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when?” (137). The community finds in Baby Suggs a suitable target for its anger (137). As a result of their willingness to project their anger, Beloved’s murder can be traced directly to the community’s refusal to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe that the slavecatchers were returning to take her and her children back to Sweet Home: “the party. . . explained why nobody ran on ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut ’cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions” (157).

Once begun, this community crisis manifests itself in a loss of distinctions among community members. Girard writes that the sacrificial crisis is characterized by a loss of individuality and identity “that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats” (Violence 49). Institutionalized slavery itself tended to disallow individuality and to categorize African Americans as a group without individual traits. More often than not, slave owners denied slaves their very humanity. This tendency is evident in Beloved where “Schoolteacher,” a slavemaster at Sweet Home where Sethe and Paul D were slaves, carefully classifies the animal and human traits of his slaves. Within the community around 124, initially the difference between the community and its victimizers is effaced when the community begins to target its own members, ostracizing Sethe and Baby Suggs. Denver, especially, suffers as an outcast from the community. Difference is further effaced when individuals within the community begin to lose their defining traits. Animosity and suspicion spread rapidly within the community, threatening social institutions and eroding traditional values. For example, when Paul D finally leaves 124, unable to understand or accept Sethe’s rationale for killing Beloved, he ends up sleeping in the church’s cold and damp cellar. When Stamp Paid learns about Paul D’s situation, he becomes incensed and confronts Ella about why no one has offered him work or a bed to sleep in: “Why he have to
ask? Can’t nobody offer? What’s going on? Since when a black man come to town have to sleep in a cellar like a dog?” (186). Sethe’s and Baby Suggs’ transgressions engender a range of breaches of social conduct within the community.

Crisis is also manifested in a loss of values and a breakdown of social and religious institutions. In direct response to Beloved’s murder and the slavecatcher’s threat, Baby Suggs relinquishes her role as the community’s spiritual leader. As a result, the community’s religious underpinnings falter, threatening it with a deepening of the crisis. Girard writes that “When the religious framework of a society starts to totter, . . . the whole cultural foundation of the society is put in jeopardy. The institutions lose their vitality; . . . social values are rapidly eroded, and the whole cultural structure seems on the verge of collapse” (Violence 49). This deepening of the crisis is also evident in the community’s response to Baby Suggs’ death. The narrator tells us that “Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation, and spite. Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times. Her outrageous claim, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it” (171). Thus, the townsfolk are entangled in cycles of violence that threaten their community.

With the appearance of Beloved, the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter, and Paul D, the crisis of difference extends to the realms between the living and the dead, effacing crucial differences for the community and further weakening the difference between a past believed to be dead and the present. However, it is important to remember that Sethe and others in her community do not admit firm distinctions between past and present. Even before Beloved manifests herself in flesh and blood, Sethe believes that the past has existed alongside the present, especially since Beloved has never stopped being a presence at 124, as a ghost, as the “pool of red” (8) that Paul D. encounters as soon as he walks through the door. Karla Holloway notes that “the relatively limited idea of time as being either in the past, the present, or the future is inadequate for a text like Beloved” (“A Spiritual” 521). Beloved’s arrival contributes to this sense that the boundaries between past and present are not fixed. More importantly, perhaps, Beloved’s arrival leads to the erasure of difference between Sethe, Denver, and Be-
loved, whose identities and roles within the family begin to shift and merge. Sethe sustains her role as mother until she acknowledges that Beloved is her daughter, at which point their roles as mother and daughter begin to blur. Beloved and Sethe seem to exchange roles completely: "Neither Sethe nor Beloved knew or cared about it one way or the other. They were too busy rationing their strength to fight each other. So it was she [Denver] who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would" (239). The crisis within 124 and the community surrounding 124 demonstrates how, throughout *Beloved*, the past usurps the present and how the persistence of the past disrupts Sethe’s and the community’s growth and struggles for harmony. Difference within the community can only be restored through a community-sanctioned sacrifice.

Morrison mirrors this crisis of difference within the community in a narrative crisis that collapses temporal differences and differences in narrative voice. The linear narrative progression within the novel is thwarted by returns of the repressed, by repetitions of the originary violence of slavery which force their way into consciousness. Sethe attempts to repress the memories of having murdered her daughter and to forget everything about her past life as a slave at Sweet Home. Sethe tells us that she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically. . . . Then something. The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes. (6)

However, sparked by Paul D’s return, Sethe’s memories begin erupting into consciousness against her will, thwarting her attempts to forget and interrupting her daily life. The past, Sethe argues, “comes back whether we want it to or not”(14).

Similarly, the forward movement of Sethe’s plot is deferred by these returns of the repressed. Thus, the text is subject to a compulsion to repeat the past, in which the past struggles to work its way
into the consciousness of the text. Because Sethe’s memories are “unspeakable,” too painful to be allowed into consciousness, the narrative strategy in the novel resembles a slow circling, a recursive plot movement that integrates time past with time present. Sethe’s secrets only slowly emerge through a series of detours and deferrals: “Circling, circling, now she was gnawing something else instead of getting to the point” (162). Sethe is aware that “the circle she was making around the room, him [Paul D], the subject, would remain one” (163). Even when she tries to tell the story for herself, Sethe detours, gets as far as into the shed where she killed Beloved, and can go no further:

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. . . . Sethe paused in her circle again and looked out the window. She remembered when the yard had a fence with a gate that somebody was always latching and unlatching in the time when 124 was busy as a way station. (163)

Many of Sethe’s stories are not incorporated as past, but are contemporaneous with the present; in essence, they are unconscious repetitions of the past in the present within the text. It is as if the surface of the text were a consciousness into which memories previously repressed emerge, the product of the text’s compulsion to repeat. As the text progresses, more and more often stories of the past emerge in this way, heightening the textual crisis. For example, once Sethe identifies Beloved as her daughter, she begins to allow memories that she has desperately tried to suppress to enter her consciousness. These memories erupt into the text without being identified as memories and outside of any specific storytelling context.

Beloved’s arrival further heightens the text’s temporal crisis. Her presence constitutes a physical return of the repressed and the existence of time past within time present. The glimpses Morrison provides into Beloved’s consciousness reveal that she is the living memory of a race of oppressed and enslaved people. Moreover, Beloved is the manifestation of the past’s demands on the present, its desire to usurp the present and to deny Sethe and Denver and the entire community their right to live in the present. Her return is
a violence and an accusation—reciprocal violence incarnate; the claim she stakes at 124 translates into a violent entrapment in the past.

As in *The Bluest Eye*, where Morrison signals narrative and communal collapse through the loss of punctuation, the lack of punctuation in Beloved’s monologue reflects the crisis of narrative difference. Because Beloved’s monologue erupts into the forward-moving plot and is rendered in a stream-of-consciousness narrative style, it also emphasizes the persistence of those memories, their unwillingness to die or be repressed. The use of stream-of-consciousness in Beloved’s monologue further suggests the eruption of memory into consciousness. Reaching centuries into a collective past, Beloved’s monologue describes the passage from Africa, the overcrowding on slaverships, where the dead are left to rot among the living, who subsist on the worst food, and with insufficient water and little air to breathe: “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching... the man on my face is dead... the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face” (210).

Beloved’s narrative crisis manifests itself not only in temporal or chronological collapse, but also in the collapse of difference among narrative voices. Eventually the narrative crisis reaches a point at which the identity of the narrators is impossible to determine. Morrison frequently shifts point of view, sometimes relying on the third-person narration that dominates the text, but at times slipping into a first-person narration. At times, it is unclear who is narrating or whose consciousness is being rendered. Any one of the characters might be relating a particular memory, and we come to sense that these memories are shared, that the history they refer to is a communal one, important for and belonging to all of the characters. They speak to the history of a people and as such can be said to belong to no one narrator in particular.

In one example, Denver begins to tell Beloved the story of her own birth, a story that is repeated in fragments and through fits and starts several times throughout the novel. Initially, the narrative renders Denver’s consciousness in the third person: “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked”
(78). However, signaled by two skipped lines in the text, the narrative lapses into a third-person narration that speaks through a shared consciousness, both Denver’s and Sethe’s: “In an effort so great it made her sick to her stomach, Sethe turned onto her right side. Amy unfastened the back of her dress and said, ‘Come here, Jesus’ when she saw. Sethe guessed it must be bad because after that call to Jesus Amy didn’t speak for a while” (79). The chapter ends without returning to the linear, forward-moving plot or the storytelling context.

The story of Denver’s birth is continued in the next chapter in passages that are clearly Sethe’s memories, Sethe’s consciousness. The continuation of the story is marked only by the narrator’s comments that “however many times Baby denied it, Sethe knew that the grief at 124 started when she jumped down off the wagon, her newborn tied to her chest in the underwear of a white girl looking for Boston” (90). In another instance, Denver’s monologue becomes a “duet as the two of them lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved’s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved” (78). As Denver proceeds with the story, Morrison slips out of Denver’s voice and into the voice of a limited omniscient narrator, a slip that suggests a conflation of voices belonging to Denver, Beloved, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and indeed a whole people. By fusing past and present, and by fusing the consciousnesses of the characters, Morrison emphasizes the importance of the former slaves’ shared past and provides an emotional and historical context for the lives of her central characters and the community in the present.

Through her narrative strategy, Morrison emphasizes the need for the characters to claim their past and to see that past as a shared, communal experience. Sethe believes her daughter has returned to be with her and that she must justify her actions to her, but most of all her monologue lays claim to Beloved: “BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now” (200-01). Denver is equally possessive of Beloved: “Love her. I do. She played with me and always came to be with me whenever I needed her. She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine”
Sethe, Beloved, and Denver's chorus arises to give voice to their mutual claims on each other and to emphasize the shared nature of their experience as oppressed African American women: "you are mine," the voices say (216). Finally, however, the conflation of their voices signals an intense lack of narrative difference.

The cycle of violence that plagues Sethe's community and the effacement of narrative difference can only be resolved through narrative and communal sacrifice. The reenactment of the original trauma by both Sethe and the community, who relive and reproduce the anxiety repressed at the time, resolves both the crisis of difference within the community and the narrative crisis, restoring the novel to time present and the community to a state of enlivening distinction. Peter Brooks writes that "the repetition of traumatic experiences in the dreams of the neurotics can be seen to have the function of seeking retrospectively to master the flood of stimuli, to perform a mastery or binding of mobile energy through developing that anxiety which earlier was lacking—a lack which permitted the breach and thus caused the traumatic neurosis" (100). Thus when Morrison stages the reenactment of the slavecatchers' invasion of Sethe's yard, she allows for a reproduction of anxiety and an escape from textual neurosis.

The reenactment takes place in the next-to-final scene in the novel. Eighteen years earlier, when a white man had ridden into her yard to take her and her children back into slavery, Sethe had struck out at one of her own, exerting herself in the only way possible and striving in some way to take control of a situation in which she was otherwise powerless. Beloved's murder, however, perpetuates a chain of reciprocal violence that entangles the community in the past, and initiates a plot equally bound to the past. Consequently, to escape both the narrative crisis and to end the chain of reciprocal violence, there must be a reenactment of that original violence with a difference: the target of Sethe's violence must be the oppressors themselves. At the close of the novel, Sethe, believing that the white man approaching in a wagon is a slavecatcher returned to take her "best thing" away from her again, strikes out at the white oppressor. Although the target of her vengeance is arguably a better man than the schoolteacher, he is, nonetheless, white, and in Sethe's brain, Mr. Bodwins' ride up to her gate repeats schoolteacher's invasion; as a result, his approach
produces in her the previously repressed anxiety. By attacking her white oppressors, Sethe forever names the cause of contention within the community. This ritual reexperiencing of trauma, witnessed by the entire community, indeed, sanctioned by the community, constitutes the violence to end all violence, the ritual sacrifice that can restore harmony within the community and difference within the narrative. This reenactment of the original trauma allows Sethe to escape from the pattern of repetition and to reclaim her life from Beloved, who instantly and miraculously vanishes. From this point the novel can continue in the present, pushing toward an imagined future.

The reenactment of Beloved’s murder, this repetition with a difference, does not release the novel from plottedness altogether, though it does set the stage for reconciliation and an imagined future. The final chapter of Beloved recounts Paul D’s return to 124 where his “memory” of Beloved “turns... into dustmotes floating in light” (264). Still, the text of this chapter is dominated by a return of repressed memories for Paul D. However, this return is a conscious working through of painful memories of the past; his rememory functions to exorcize his own ghosts. And, significantly, Paul D’s detour brings him back to the present and to 124 with this comment from the narrator: “Now his coming is the reverse of his going” (270). Paul D and the text itself literally backtrack their way through the past to the present, detouring through the past to arrive at the present relieved of the burden of the past and plottedness.

Paul D’s final chapter reminds us that the novel cannot escape from plottedness or repetition until the individual character has worked through painful, repressed memories of the past. In part, we would expect the novel to be released from plot with the reenactment of the schoolteacher’s invasion of Sethe’s yard, and the scene does enable us to return to the middles of Morrison’s text to infuse those repetitions of violence with meaning, to understand them in the context of that end. However, the lack of escape from plottedness might also invite a distinction between the types of violence discussed above. For example, though the violence of slavery, the violent silence that the community visits on Baby Suggs, and Sethe’s murder of Beloved are all links in a chain of reciprocal violence, it is important to point out that Sethe’s murder of Be-
loved is necessitated by the violence of slavery, a choice Sethe makes based on her belief in an afterlife as well as a choice made in a situation in which there are no choices. Despite these distinctions in types of violence, Paul D’s chapter impresses on us the need for the individual, and indeed the entire community, to work through the personal past consciously in order to identify the source of violence in their midst, and thus to move forward.¹² Paul D returns to 124 and to Sethe whole and wholly conscious of the pain he harbors from the past, but he has clearly moved beyond this pain, enabling him to forgive Sethe; he has finally unloaded the “tobacco tin” of his heart in which he had buried his memories for so long.

Finally, Morrison’s tour de force cannot and does not end with Paul D. Instead, the narrator, speaking in a voice that signals the close of plot and that speaks from outside of plot, entreats us not to pass this story on: “it was not a story to pass on” (274). The use of this voice clearly signals the end of plot; however, it as powerfully compels us to return to the story, to dwell on it, even while it attempts to persuade us to forget, as the commentary suggests the townsfolk “forgot [Beloved]... Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep” (275). This narrator’s pleas for readers to forget the story they have just read forces them to reassess its meaning. I do not believe that this would be the case if in the narrator’s eyes the story is simply too painful to remember. Clearly it has and will be remembered, and not only will it be remembered, but it will take up residence in the consciousness of the reader, as opposed to the unconscious of the novel’s characters. Perhaps, when Morrison’s narrator asserts that Beloved’s story is “not a story to pass on,” she refers to the story of the violence within the community, and the community’s tendency to repeat their oppressors’ violence in their own communities. Perhaps what is not to be passed on is this self-destructive violence.

Beloved serves as a critical turning point in Morrison’s quest to resolve the problem of violence that has preoccupied her in four previous novels. Indeed, this “ending” plunges us back into the middles of her work, into her earlier novels, enabling us to infer meaning[s] that has escaped us and her characters there. In a sense, Beloved returns Morrison to her own novelistic origins even as it returns African Americans to their ancestral past. Beginning with
The Bluest Eye, it is clear that Morrison’s characters will struggle to escape the past or to reexperience it differently. Study of the subsequent novels reveals that Morrison’s characters will not move forward without coming to terms with both their personal and ancestral past, nor will they escape the violence that refusal to embrace those lost traditional values seems to inaugurate. For example, in The Bluest Eye Polly Breedlove’s attempts to distance herself from a painful past and from her African American identity contribute to her daughter’s decline into madness. Repetitions of the past also plague her husband, Cholly Breedlove. He rapes their daughter to help assuage the loneliness he feels from having been abandoned as a child. Similarly, in Song of Solomon, having adopted the values of the white middle class, Macon Dead subjugates his own people as an unfeeling, tyrannical landlord. Macon’s sister, Pilate Dead, is murdered by Guitar whose revolutionary goals ironically align him with the white ruling class and entrap him in cycles of violence. Finally, in Beloved, slavery erodes the community values that had once helped to preserve and unite the people. Traditional values are so perverted by slavery that Sethe is driven to murder her own daughter to keep her from slavery’s horrors. Until Sethe comes to grips with the past, her present is ruled by violence.

More importantly, however, a study of Morrison’s novels shows that Morrison herself must delve deeper and deeper into African American history to resolve the problems her fiction poses. The Bluest Eye returns to the Depression to explore oppression’s effects on the lives of her African American characters. Sula works its way from the aftermath of World War I to the Depression to the mid-60s to chronicle the ways an African American community struggles to stay united within an oppressive social structure. Finally, Morrison begins to pose solutions to the problems of violence and preserving cultural identity when, in Beloved, she returns to the most devastating African American trauma: slavery. Morrison’s work as a whole is shaped by a persistent need to narrate and thus escape an ever-more distant past. Her characters, her individual novels, and her work as a whole are driven by a need to understand and move beyond the past. In Jazz (1992), Morrison still treats the problems of violence in African American communities and the pressures that the violence of oppression places on those
communities. Thus, as a body of work, Morrison's novels drive deeper and deeper into the past.

_Beloved_ gives testimony to the pain that all the slave women and their descendants have suffered and will suffer. According to Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, Morrison has decided that she must "rip the veil" behind which the slave narrator was forced to hide" (97). Morrison, as Hudson-Weems and Samuels point out, must also reconstruct the narrative of the slave woman, whose story is seldom recorded and then not fully. She provides "the avenue for a resurrected female slave narrator's voice" (97-98). The story that Toni Morrison's _Beloved_ tells is, in her narrator's words, "not a story to pass on." Molly Abel Travis writes that Morrison reminds us that we must "embrace the wholeness of our personal histories and cultural histories; we must remember even those parts we would most like to forget" (18). It is clear that Morrison has complicated the process of memory even as she inscribes this unwritten history and that her novels as emphatically remind us that history, both personal and cultural, has the power to entrap and to enslave.

Notes

1. Mbalia argues, as I have, that each of Morrison's novels defines or redefines the problem of oppression, moving closer and closer to a solution, a way to cope [with] and move beyond oppression (88). Moreover, Mbalia identifies "the suicidal or homicidal nature of those Africans who divorce themselves from other Africans" as a recurrent theme in Morrison's fiction (88). "Isolation," Mbalia continues, "literally tears apart the family—nuclear, the extended, and the nation" (90).

2. Sitter suggests that the novel "involves the way internalization of oppressor's values can distort all intimate human relationships and even subvert the self" (18). Sitter asserts, moreover, that human emotions are twisted and perverted as a result of slavery's view of individuals as property so that their value is assessed in terms of "resale value" (18).

3. Mbalia shows how Denver's and Sethe's isolation is "genocidal for the race" and "serve[s] to further divide the African community and, as a consequence, leave[s] it vulnerable to the oppression and exploitation of the slave society" (90). Demetrakopoulos notes that "Sethe further fixes on the past by never mingling with the Black community, by protecting the only child who stays with her, her daughter Denver, from the past without seeming to ever think of the girl's future or need for community" (54).

4. Harris notes that "by denouncing her calling, Baby Suggs rejects the power of folk imagination, which has clearly served a constructive purpose for her and the
entire community along Bluestone Road" (175). Moreover, Harris notes that Baby Suggs’ rejection of this role is a “victimization” (175).

5. Holloway states that “Beloved held not only her own history, but those of ‘sixty million and more’” (523). Holloway writes that “Beloved is not only Sethe’s dead daughter returned, but the return of all the faces, all the drowned, but remembered, faces of mothers and their children who have lost their being because of the force of Euro-American slave-history” (522). “Living itself,” Holloway writes, “is suspended in this story because of the simultaneous presence of the past” (521). Finally, Holloway suggests that “Sethe’s, Denver’s, and Beloved’s voices blend and merge as text and lose the distinction of discourse as they narrate” in order to show that time and space are collapsed, irrelevant in their shared monologue (“Beloved: A Spiritual” 520).

6. Mobley writes that “while the slave narrative characteristically moves in a chronological, linear narrative fashion, Beloved meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down into space. Indeed, Morrison’s text challenges the Western notion of linear time that informs American history and the slave narratives” (“Different” 192). In addition, Holloway notes that “Beloved becomes a text collected with the textures of living and dying rather than with a linear movement of events” (Holloway and Demetrakopoulos 222).

7. Samuels and Hudson-Weems claim that we find in Sethe’s behavior yet another example of the slave’s resistance to slavery. They note that Sethe’s inability to recall the painful experiences in her past, is “due in part to her successful act of ‘disremembering,’ of consciously blotterizing her painful past. Most painful had been the denial and then severance of any semblance of a meaningful relationship with her mother, who had been branded and later hanged because of her daily resistance to slavery” (99). Of course, that memory is compounded by the violence and loss she suffers at the hands of schoolteacher, Mr. Garner’s brother, who comes to oversee the plantation after his brother’s death. Finally, Morrison refers to the “complicated psychic power one had to exercise to resist devastation” (quoted in Mobley, “Different” 197).

8. Other critics point out, as I have, that Morrison’s texts keep secrets, using the tension of withheld information to drive the plot which is thus charged by the reader’s desire for meaning. Mobley observes that Beloved is a text that depends heavily on secrets and secrecy and that “the text of Beloved moves through a series of narrative starts and stops that are complicated by Sethe’s desire to forget or ‘disremember’ the past” (“Different” 194).

9. Rainwater suggests that “Morrison sometimes employs a Jamesian technique: she temporarily merges the narrator’s point of view with that of a character, but later undercut or problematizes this point of view by presenting its alternatives. Such a strategy finally reiterates her thematic message that there is no reliable ground or ‘mooring’ from which to know or tell the ‘true’ version of any story” (97). More importantly, characters are sometimes exposed to variants that “tease them into acts of interpretation” (97).

10. Even the trip by Mr. Bodwin, a white man who had helped Baby Suggs and rented the house at Bluestone to her, is a return to his origins and a working through memory to the present: “he had promised his sister a detour to pick up
[Denver]. He didn’t have to think about the way—he was headed for the house he was born in. Perhaps it was his destination that turned his thoughts to time—how it dripped and ran” (259). His memories are connected with slavery and the ridicule he suffered as a “bleached nigger” abolitionist (260). The closer he moves toward 124, the deeper he digs in his memory for things he buried there as a child: “the box of tin soldiers. . . . the watch chain with no watch” (260). Eventually his thoughts turn to the “runaway slavewoman . . . [who] got herself into a world of trouble” (260).

11. Mbalia suggests that “not until the cause of separation is clarified, is out in the open, struggled with and struggled against, can African people come together again. Beloved must materialize into a visible, tangible entity of which the community is aware, instead of an amorphous apparition, an oppression of which the community is unconscious” (91). As Mbalia points out, the community must come together to eradicate the past, to struggle against the root of the violence that has subjugated them and set up animosity within their group. Moreover, in Rainwater’s narrative analysis of Morrison’s novels, she points out the even while Morrison employs a third-person narrator and gives speeches to Sethe and Denver, none can finally reach the truth of Beloved’s existence (100). In fact, the truth of Beloved’s existence can only be relived; her death must be relived before her identity and origins can be verified.

12. Berger problematizes readings of Beloved that suggest that the community has successfully overcome its divisions and exorcized the ghost of the past. Berger is correct when he writes that “the ghost will return to inhabit each succeeding present until the crimes that repeat themselves are worked through in every organ of the body politic” (415). However, Paul D’s final chapter, which is so perplexing for Berger, suggests that the process of rememory, exorcism, and mourning must be not only a communal process, but also an individual one. Morrison indicates that it is not enough for the community to exorcize its communal ghost.

Works Cited


—. “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through.” Standard Edition of the


