

Abjecting the Parodic Phallus and Providing What I Lack: Doubling as the Claim of the Real on the Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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莫里森的小说充斥着斗争与矛盾，强调奴隶制度带给黑人心灵生活持久的创伤。在她的小说《宠儿》中，同名人物是由鬼化身而成的美丽黑人女子。十八年前，宠儿的母亲为了阻止奴隶主把他们一家重新带回非人的奴隶生活，亲手用一把手锯割开了刚开始学爬行的她的喉咙，结束了她的生命。十八年后，宠儿从水中走向人间，即代表她的重生，又代表在跨大西洋奴隶贸易中远离家园，被从非洲掳往美国的六万多黑人。宠儿的出现不可避免得预示她母亲赛思将经历灾后心理创伤。受到冲击的不仅是赛思，还有和她一起生活在蓝石路124号的所有家人。在宠儿重新出现之前，她就频频神秘袭击这个风雨飘摇的家，用无形的魔力赶走了她的两个哥哥。从另一个角度，她的出现给了所有仍活在奴隶生活梦魇中的整个社区黑人一个面对过去，重新寻回自我的机会。宠儿的妹妹丹佛在姐姐出现之前，是被困在代表母亲过去的蓝石路房子中的失去未来的女孩。宠儿的出现解了丹佛的孤独之渴。可是宠儿的一岁孩子的心理，加之她的贪婪导致她试图把赛思占为己有，甚至想杀死赛思已达到她的目的。这时的丹佛只能勇敢走出家庭，到外面的黑人社区寻求帮助以解救她的母亲。最终，丹佛用她自己缺少的母爱帮赛思走出了过去。

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, doubling, the symbolic, the real, phallus

1 Introduction

Morrison's fiction is an arena of struggle and dialogue, highlighting the aftermath of the chattel system. This is particularly evident in *Beloved* (1987), which opens with a display of venom and violence of a baby ghost who, reincarnated as the full-grown eponymous character, tries to bury alive the people inhabiting 124 Bluestone. *Beloved* is based on the true story of a runaway slave, Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her children rather than condemn them to the soul-death of slavery when her former owners came to reclaim them. In this richly conceived and daring novel, *Beloved* intrudes into the cloistered world of her mother and sister in an effort to reenact what happened there eighteen years before. Consequently, a long, unspeakable history is condensed into the ghost, highlighting the corporeality of slavery trauma.

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In *Cultural Trauma*, Eyerman designates slavery as a “‘primal scene’ which could, potentially, unite all ‘African Americans’ in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa” (2001: 1). Despite highlighting a collective trauma implicating all black people, slavery further distinguishes itself with its inescapable belated infliction on “a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2001: 2). In this light, *Beloved*’s foray into the community eighteen years after the murder conforms to the fact that at one point, cultural trauma “need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all” (2001: 2). The overwhelming, pervasive presence of the ghost made flesh corresponds to the cultural trauma of slavery constructed as a primal scene, in relation to which individual/collective identity takes shape throughout this novel.

In Morrison’s work, slavery comes up as a disengaging point in the history of America. Eyerman observes that “as opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric” (2001: 2). The rupture, however, impels black people to search for what they are deprived of throughout their whole lives. In this novel, symbolic-defying and incarnating the real of slavery¹, *Beloved* represents what is removed from them by the chattel system, that is the phallus.

Morrison employs *Beloved* to expose the real of slavery and to incite the interactions among the desire-ridden characters tyrannized or traumatized by the legacy of slavery. In this novel, most black people are castrated or depersonalized by the cultural trauma, buried alive in the devouring past. Morrison invites a whole panorama of characters engaging with images, voices, illusions and fantasies to illuminate on the one hand the full spectrum of desire and to highlight the ravages of slavery trauma; on the other hand, loud and demanding, the baby ghost speaks in an uncanny way which inflames the interplay of the desire of the other characters upon their encounter with each other in

¹ Although the historical reality of the Sixty Million is conceded, it remains a repressed presence in modern America. The real is used in the sense of the Lacanian real, namely, “that limit of experience resisting symbolization” (Libbrecht 2001: 154). Significantly, Morrison employs the real of slavery as an effective means to break the state of live burial forced on black people by the white Other.

general and with her in particular. In fact, all the characters experience Beloved either as a splitting aspect of their psyche or as a kind of *doppelganger* for their own feelings of loss, grief, confusion and rage. Emphatically, Beloved is invented by the author to explore the chattel system as the real. However, implacable and parasitic, she simultaneously suggests the lethal effect of being buried alive in a devouring past.

2 The Phallic Mother

Lacan nominates the phallus as the privileged signifier which secures the other signifiers' status in the symbolic dimension: "it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier" (2006: 579). As the signifier towards which the living subject pushes him/herself forward throughout life, the phallus figures as the signifier which promises to endow the subject with the subject position in the symbolic order. However, the signifying chain points to the fact that what the phallic signifier introduces into the signifying system is merely *absence* or *difference*, which sabotages the signifier/signified dyad and disrupts the interrelated signifiers. Accordingly, the phallus signifies the absolute Otherness of the symbolic order. Naturally, Lacan portrays it as an "imaginary object" (2006: 693). In this connection, Rose writes, "the Other therefore stands against the phallus – its pretence to meaning and false consistency. It is from the Other that the phallus seeks authority and is refused" (1982: 51). Consequently, though enjoined and activated by the phallus, the Lacanian signifier virtually spells ruin to it. For this reason, the privileged signifier is virtually a parodic phallus which symbolizes the intrinsic lack of the Other.

In Morrison's fiction, most black women enter into meaning through motherhood: they attempt to neutralize the *lack* forced upon them by slavery by treating their children as extended parts of themselves. In so doing, they identify themselves as a full identity in language. However, Ragland-Sullivan remarks, if a mother fetishizes her child, taking him/her to be her (all), "a mammocratic state of totalitarian horror rules. Such fetishization unveils another idealizing harmony, implying that a child can make up for what is missing," (1991: 75) – the phallus. Clearly, by treating the child as her phallus,

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the mother “‘enjoys’ by refusing identity to the child *qua* different from her desire” (1991: 75). To clarify, the child is treated by his/her mother as an indistinguishable part of herself. As a result, she keeps her child from entering into culture: “The child is [. . .] not nameable, not signifiable, not other” (1991: 75). In a similar manner, commenting on the troubled parent-child relationships among African Americans, Morrison says in an interview:

Parents who simply adore their children and really and truly do want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them. They say to them [. . .] “Your life is not worth living.” [. . .] “If you do not behave this way *I want you to behave*, then leave or get out. You must live *this* way.” Too frequently love has to do with owning that other person. (Bakerman 1994: 42, original italics)

What Morrison suggests here are parents who interfere with the style of life of their children. As a result, as Ragland-Sullivan claims, fetishized as the phallus, “such a child identifies with the real rather than the imaginized symbolic which is not pushed away to the livable distance that constitutes most people as subjects of the symbolic and imaginary orders” (1991: 75). From this perspective, treating her child as her phallus, the black mother refuses the distance between self and Other, thus turning him/her into the symbol of the haunting real.

Dysfunctional black motherhood often manifests itself as the mother’s failure to satisfy her child’s desire for mirroring in his/her individuation years, which is discussed as the trauma of maternal silence in this paper. Eluding meaning and the mastery of the child, it proves devastating to the child’s sense of self. Accordingly, trauma in Morrison’s works manifests itself mainly as the characters’ failure to capture the unconscious meaning of maternal silence, therefore attempting to define themselves in relation to the maternal figure as an inseparable psychic part of their own selves. In her work, Morrison highlights the black female who, scarred by maternal silence in their separation-individuation phase, seeks surrogate objects or treats her child as her selfobject in her ensuing life; in so doing, she registers as the phallic mother, remaining fixated on her child who serve as the phallus for her.

The phallic mother has in effect buried her children alive. The state of live burial corresponds to Lacan's description of the state of the subject split between being and thinking in the symbolic order: elaborating his graphic illustrations of the split subject, Lacan says, "either I am not thinking or I am not" (qtd. in Fink 1995: 45). He links thinking with the automatic functioning of language in the unconscious, which sabotages the subject's sense of being, reducing him/her to a false being in the symbolic order. On the other hand, the false sense of self insinuates that the subject is in effect living in the imaginary order, valorized by an imaginized sense of wholeness and greatness. In this connection, in *Beloved*, the traumatized characters are split between a false sense of being and the unconscious reenactment of their traumatic past.

Beloved's return suggests Sethe's longing for a merger with her own mother. Incarnating the real of slavery trauma, *Beloved*'s reincarnation is prefigured by the clash between the real and the symbolic: "It took him [Paul D] a while to realize that his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were [. . .] The house itself was pitching. Sethe slid to the floor and struggled to get back into her dress" (1997: 18). It is apparent that Paul D has bumped into Sethe's reenactment of her traumatic past – the infanticide. Consequently, Sethe's false sense of self is ruptured by the unexpected pressing-in of something into her, that is, *Beloved*. Restaging the slave history, *Beloved* signifies the irruption of the real into the symbolic. At another level, functioning as both Sethe's baby ghost and her dead mother, *Beloved*'s return insinuates Sethe's longing for preoedipal connection. Accordingly, this episode is inaugurated by the real and impelled by Sethe's imaginary desire for her long-dead mother.

Emerging as what the white symbolic fails to destroy or displace, *Beloved* acts as the phallus removed from black people by the victimizing institution of slavery. After her return, both Sethe and Denver seek oneness with her, reflecting their desire to be valorized in the symbolic order. Correspondingly, Mayberry states that "Sethe copes with her past by refusing, ever, to move again," which is suggested by her "clinging stubbornly to a single interpretation of time and history" (2007: 154). Put another way, she is buried alive in a perpetual past. In keeping with the role of a perfect mother, Sethe deviates from her ordinary life, becoming entangled with her two daughters in

inventing and fulfilling whimsical wishes: “At first they played together. [...] From the night they ice-skated together under a star-loaded sky and drank sweet milk by the stove, to the string puzzles Sethe did for them in afternoon light, and shadow pictures in the gloaming” (1997: 240). In this scene, the three mix together without tags of mother and daughter, grasping their chance for a new start. Setting herself the task of excavating the site of Beloved’s desire, Sethe soon loses possession of herself. What she desires to fill is, in effect, the lack of the Other, which is implied by Beloved’s insatiability and inconsolability. On the other hand, Beloved clings to Sethe to such an extent that she could hardly be left alone: “She want[s] Sethe’s company for hours to watch the layer of brown leaves waving at them from the bottom of the creek” (1997: 240–241). Beloved’s escalating demand for company suggests her as suffering from neurotic difficulties. Saturated with childhood’s merriment, this passage suggests Sethe’s language of motherlove percolating through time to Beloved and Denver; it shows a point when language fails and the imaginarized oneness triumphs.

Dolar’s insight into the double is useful to analyze Beloved’s function for Sethe and Denver:

On the one hand, it enjoys at our expense, committing acts we would not otherwise (or rather would only ever) dream of. On the other, it does not simply enjoy but rather *commands* enjoyment, forcing us into a position of servitude to our appetites [. . .]. Its uncanniness, therefore, stems from the same compulsion to repeat which the subject is powerless to resist. (qtd. in Parkin-Gounelas 2001: 110, original italics)

The double is always the figure of *jouissance*, which fuses pleasure and pain as well as life and death. It reflects the subject’s attempt to compensate the lack forced upon him/herself by the Other.

As a revenant, Beloved thrives on Sethe’s life, and mother and daughter switch places soon after Beloved’s return: “When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself – be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best, Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane” (1997: 242). Beloved’s proneness to aggressive and potentially violent behavior accords with her role as a revenant intent on perforating symbolic bounds. What

she desires is a total fusion with her mother: “Dressed in Sethe’s dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk” (1997: 241). Furthermore, she tries to colonize and cannibalize Sethe: she feeds off her mother, “getting bigger, plumper by the day” (1997: 239), while her mother becomes smaller; “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (1997: 250). Correspondingly, Di Prete reads Beloved cannibalism as speaking to her function as the foreign body of the repressed traumatic memories: “As the “foreign body” expands [. . .] the “real” body of Sethe [. . .] ceases to exist. Beloved swells as she feeds herself avidly with the stories of past traumas that, under her pressure, the inhabitants of 124 unwillingly share with her” (2006: 74). In this light, Beloved’s destructive consumption of Sethe suggests the extent to which the latter has succumbed to the aftershock of her traumatic past.

Sethe fails to control Beloved psychologically, and any failure by her to attend to the latter’s urgent need for mirroring triggers an immediate outburst of narcissistic rage. When Sethe, in the clearing, is able to make peace with Halle’s memory, looking forward to a new life (with Paul D and her two girls), Beloved tries to strangle her mother, mimicking the brutal violence Sethe displayed many years ago. Exploring the aftermath of longtime captivity, Herman points out:

Prolonged captivity undermines or destroys the ordinary sense of a relatively safe sphere of initiative, in which there is some tolerance for trial and error. To the chronically traumatized person, any action has potentially dire consequences. There is no room for mistakes. (1992: 91)

In this light, Beloved’s sense of safety has been destroyed by her claustrophobic experience in the ship;² angry and spiteful, she displays her inability to balance herself in relation to others, for all relationships are filtered through extremity. Her matricide suggests her unconscious attempt at keeping away the anxiety of reexperiencing fragmentation, because Sethe’s betrayal once again threatens her very effacement. At another level, her aggression is inextricably linked with her desire for maternal attention. As Kristeva

² Beloved complicates her identity by describing her former dwelling-place as where “there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too” (1997: 210). It is a place that is meant to evoke two things: a womb where she is kept small, and a slave ship where there is “nothing to breathe down [. . .] and no room to move in” (1997: 75).

writes: “*want* and *aggressivity* are chronologically separable but logically coextensive. *Aggressivity appears* to us as a rejoinder to the original deprivation felt from the time of the mirage known as ‘primary narcissism’” (1982: 39, original italics). Identifying herself with her mother, Beloved’s cannibalistic behavior towards Sethe borders on self-extinction, speaking to her effort to detach or abject³ a psychic part (which is constituted by her mother) from herself to cope with the imminent threat of the maternal betrayal. At another level, knowing nothing about the inside/outside binary, Beloved figures uncannily as the Lacanian libido, refusing to be pinned down by the legacy of slavery. Thus, her recourse to death to deal with her mother’s betrayal suggests her desire for mastery and freedom in the white symbolic world.

Throughout the novel, Sethe seems harried and preoccupied, and Denver can never have her undivided attention. Before Beloved’s reincarnation, Denver displays a certain aloofness towards her mother within the hermetic maternal realm of silence: on the one hand, seared with aching loneliness, she thirsts for relatedness and love; on the other, however, after being informed of her mother’s past, she is impelled further and further into her own world. Denver appears as a fragile and delicate child tragically enmeshed in the difficulties of love. It comes as natural that she immediately lays claim to oneness with Beloved after the latter’s emergence.

After Beloved’s return, Denver tries to fuse herself with Beloved, closing Beloved and herself off in a “two-person kingdom” where her imagination produces hunger and Beloved functions as the food. Denver’s “hunger” echoes her strong wish to be subjectivized in the symbolic register. Her fascination with Beloved reflects her obsession with her mOther’s desire. Yet in so doing, she resembles Sethe, who locks up herself and her two daughters in the petrified castle of 124. Denver is on edge when she becomes aware of Beloved’s escalating demands, and is aroused to the situation that “if Sethe didn’t wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might” (1997: 242).

³ Kristeva introduces the conception of the abject opposing the object. She asserts, “The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which . . . makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1982: 1–2, original italics). In this paper, the complex Kristevan term is used as a verb, referring to the process of ejecting or expelling the Other.

Eventually, Denver disengages herself from Beloved: “The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (1997: 243). Denver’s act could be read as her compensatory restoration of her shattered fantasy of an idealized merger with her mother. Morrison’s literary acumen rests in her probing of the process of trauma and healing with the double: on one level, she emphasizes the overwhelming effect of cultural disabilities arising from the deep legacy of color-class hierarchy; on another, however, she provides more space for healing based on dialogue and mutual understanding.

Denver is empowered to venture into the community when visited by the ghost of her grandmother, Baby Suggs: “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? [. . .] Is that why you can’t walk down the steps?” (1997: 244). When questioned closely by Denver what to do in a world where “there was no defense” for black people, Suggs says, “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (1997: 244). What Suggs instructs Denver to learn is the historical knowledge of slavery, which is integral to the formation of Denver’s subjectivity. In this connection, Henderson says:

Although Denver bears no physical marks or scars directly attributable to slavery – she was born in a “middle passage” of sorts, born when Sethe was on the run – her connection to slavery is immediate because of her mother, her father, her sister Beloved, and her grandmother Baby Suggs. (2002: 99)

Introjected as an idealized parent imago, Suggs figures as an inseparable part of Denver’s psychic self by holding her up to the guiding leadership of her ideals. As an ancestral figure, she passionately exhorts Denver to rememory, to pursue the knowledge of the cultural trauma in order to take her responsibility in a liberating way to achieve psychic wholeness. Denver’s rememory suggests her journeying into the otherness of herself.

When isolated, finding herself in a foreigner position, and finally forced out of the pre-oedipal society, Denver enters into the community. It is only after she steps out of the jail of 124 that she realizes that Beloved is but a stand-in for the maternal selfobject.

Denver's separation from her signifies her abjection of her phallic mother and evolution into an autonomous thinking being. This process, however, suggests a turning into signifiers of the mOther's desire. Put simply, it requires Denver to set in motion the object of her desire – from Sethe, to Beloved, to her teacher, to the community, to school, and so on. Outside 124, she finds herself not alone, which empowers her to re-enter the mother-daughter dyad as a rescuer and to provide what she lacks in 124 as well as in the Other – love. Consequently, the return of the ghost triggers the intrusion of the real of slavery in the present symbolic, enables the trauma survivors to reflect on their past life, thereby delivering them from the state of live burial.

3 Conclusion

The title character's eighteen-year departure, interpretable either as Sethe's conscious or unconscious act of suppressing the infanticide, bears the impact of history; on another level, her return promises both the healing of the scar on her neck and the scar on the psyche of all the black people traumatized by the aftershock of systemic violence. Consequently, her reincarnation suggests the critical importance of returning to the past to obtain wholeness; put another way, healing is only achieved when the survivors learn to reconcile themselves with past traumas, to dismantle the barrier between them, which signifies self-connection and communal communication.

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