

2018

Mother Memory: The Maternal Figure and Memory in Song of Solomon and Beloved

Hannah Zinker
Skidmore College, hzinker@skidmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zinker, Hannah, "Mother Memory: The Maternal Figure and Memory in Song of Solomon and Beloved" (2018). *English Honors Theses*. 6.
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol/6

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact dseiler@skidmore.edu.

Mother Memory: The Maternal Figure and Memory in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

Hannah Zinker

EN 375: Toni Morrison
Professor Stokes
18 December 2017

In the beginning of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe regrets that her memories of the plantation where she was enslaved are more vivid than the memories of her own children. Morrison writes, "Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time, and she could not forgive her memory for that" (7). Here, Sethe wrestles with memory, "cannot forgive her memory" for pushing out her children. Instead, she remembers the trees in which they played, remembers, in all its terrible beauty, the plantation where she was enslaved. Just as slavery stripped mothers of parental rights, it claims parts of Sethe's memory—memories of her children. As a slave, she had children but could not "have" her children. Her memory serves as a site of this struggle. Therefore, *Beloved* tells the story of a mother trying to live with her painful past, trying to reconcile her traumatic memories with her identity as a mother.

Though known for her writing on the black female experience in novels like *Beloved*, Morrison also considers the role of the fathers. Her earlier *Song of Solomon* opens with the epigraph "*The fathers may soar/ And the children may know their names.*" While the beginning of *Beloved* makes a mother its leading character, the epigraph in *Song of Solomon* emphasizes the fathers. Although the epigraph of *Song of Solomon* brings the reader's attention to paternity, the novel is just as much about the maternal. The importance of the maternal lies precisely in the gap left by the epigraph. By explicitly only writing of the fathers and children, Morrison creates the implicit, necessary question: what about the mothers? In a novel built around a son's relationship with his father's family, the overt focus on fathers is not the entire story. Rather, the text is filled with the presence of the maternal, informed by the powerful influence of the mothers. Motherly influence in the novel looms large, and memory is an integral part of this

maternal impact. As memory tracks a journey into the past, a journey to “know” the fathers’ names, I will argue that it is driven by the mother figure. At every turn, the mothers remember, transmit, and bring memory into the children’s lives.

Yet, the father figures are the novel’s overt center. The epigraph is about them. Milkman’s journey into his family’s past is driven by a patrilineal line. However, in a culture where the fathers can fly away, in communities fractured by the legacy of slavery, the men can leave, can choose to focus on escaping their troubles. The fathers ultimately cannot provide a center to anchor families and memories. Therefore, mothers become the absent center of the novel—absent because they are not the overt center and because the fathers leave the center absent. The mothers, then, are hidden at the center because they shape memories, their families, and the novel in ways the fathers do not.

As for *Beloved* the connection between motherhood and memory is built early and given a place of importance in the structure of the novel. Sethe cannot “forgive” her memory for bringing back painful moments of her past into her current life; her present, including her relationships to and with her children, is powerfully informed by memory. She is haunted—metaphorically and literally by the ghost of her dead baby—by her past. Sethe and the fractured, and fracturing, memories of her past are at the center of the novel. The plot moves through and with Sethe’s memories, just as she must in order to reckon with her harrowing past.

From the outset, both novels deal in parent-child relationships through, as I will argue, memory. In both of these novels we can understand memory as powerfully linked to maternal figures. In fact, I will offer a reading of a group of characters in both novels that I will call mothers as gatekeepers of memory. I want to explore how motherhood operates with memory in

Morrison's work. Maternal figures in these two novels must remember the past, reckon with it, or at least somehow live with it, and pass these memories on to the other characters. Thus, it is the mothers who continually shape memory and the future. I will begin by exploring how connecting maternal characters to the past genders memory. I will then delve into exactly who these mother gatekeepers of memory are and what their presence in the novels means. Then, because memory is gendered, I will show how Morrison provides characters who are maternal gatekeepers of memory. Memory and time are intertwined. Therefore, if mothers inform memory, the maternal determines time in the novels and the way the plots move through past, present, and, future. I will engage in a reading of time in the novels, particularly *Beloved*, through this lens of motherhood and memory, and I will argue that these forces alter time itself and inform the narrative structure of Morrison's work.

I hope to arrive at a reading of what distinguishes these maternal, memory-rich characters and why they operate the way they do in their respective novels. I argue that both novels contain mothers who act as gatekeepers of memory. *Song of Solomon* is built with mothers as an absent center, but *Beloved* forces the mother, specifically one affected by trauma, into the center. Both of the novels are about communities affected by trauma and disruption. In such communities, maternal figures must bear the weight of and mold memory. Fathers get to leave, have the opportunity to run or fly away. They escape many reminders of the past but leave the mothers behind to face the past. Therefore, the mothers are not gatekeepers by choice, but rather by necessity. In a world where the fathers can escape, the mothers must be the ones to reckon with the past. These maternal figures are more than rememberers. They shape memory and allow

other characters to gain access to their memories and structures of memory throughout the novels.

The Gendering of Memory

In both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* memory becomes gendered, especially when read in the context of motherhood and maternal characters. Both novels can be read with a feminist lens to, as Smith and Hirsch would say, “defamiliariz[e] and thus re-envisio[n] traditional modes of knowing the past” (11). With maternal figures directing memory in the novels, the traditional method of understanding the past changes. Often, the memory is passed down as a legacy, but in these novels, memory is passed forward—not down as legacy—into the present by the maternal figure. Marianne Hirsch said in an interview that *Beloved* is “a text that actually underscored the connection of gender to narratives of atrocity” (Altinay and Peto). Here, not only do I agree with Hirsch, but I will also explore how she comes to this conclusion and how a similar conclusion can be made about *Song of Solomon*. In short, I will explore the connection between gender and memory necessary to understand the full implications of mothers who are gatekeepers of memory.

First, Morrison creates a connection between motherhood and memory early in *Song of Solomon* when Milkman gets his nickname. The protagonist receives his name when Freddie the janitor discovers that Milkman’s mother Ruth breastfed him longer than many consider acceptable. Morrison writes that breastfeeding was one of Ruth’s “two secret indulgences... She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold” (13). There are two main connections to memory in this passage. First, breastfeeding is both a gendered act and a connection between mother and

child; it is also a connection to a Southern, ancestral past. In her examination of *Beloved* in relation to the Oprah book club phenomenon, Edith Frampton offers an analysis of this passage beyond most scholarly readings. Most stop at shock or reading sexual undertones. Frampton reminds readers that Freddie reacts with surprise and says “used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South” (Morrison 14). Using this context, Frampton then offers a more forgiving analysis of the scene. She writes, “From this perspective, the novel represents the interdependency of the breastfeeding relationship as a valuable holdover from an earlier time in the cultural history of African Americans, a link to a rapidly disappearing past” (151-2). Ruth, through her extended breastfeeding, can also be read as a maternal influence on memory. If extended breastfeeding is a “valuable holdover” from Southern ancestors, then Ruth is anchoring herself and her son to this ancestral past. Therefore, she, before even Pilate, becomes the first mother figure to shape memory in Milkman’s life, to infuse his life with it.

The second way in which memory connects to the breastfeeding passage is grounded in quiet metaphor. Upon first look, the reference is subtle. However, gold in *Song of Solomon* is linked to memory. It is likely no accident that Morrison wrote a bag of a father’s bones as a mistaken sack of gold. A journey for gold became a journey for the past, a journey to claim not wealth but memory and ancestral connection. If gold becomes memory, then Ruth’s breastfeeding becomes connected to memory. Her breast milk can be read as memory. Ruth has the “impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold” (13). From his mother, the young Milkman pulls threads of “spinning gold,” and Ruth in turn weaves into her son the weight and presence of the past. Morrison writes Ruth in to the long literary tradition of women as weavers. For example,

Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* spends years weaving and then strategically unweaving a tapestry to fill the time waiting for her husband's return. Each night she secretly unweaves and tricks the suitors into waiting longer for her hand. Scholars have argued that her weaving, though, is not just work to fend off boredom; it is her way of fending off suitors, of taking control of her future in her male-dominated life. Weaving is a way for literary women to reclaim a traditional activity and take agency in their lives. Therefore, if the milk Ruth feeds Milkman is "spinning gold" then her breastfeeding can be read as her way of becoming a more powerful agent in both her own and her son's life. Her agency is grounded in engaging with ancestral connection to Southern extended breastfeeding. Thus, in much the same way as Pilate, Ruth become a central maternal character in the paternal novel.

Beloved, too, includes breastfeeding as an important link to memory and is part of the gendering of memory in the novel. Breastfeeding brings together Sethe's role as a mother, memory, and the trauma of slavery. Before her escape, Sethe was assaulted by white men at Sweet Home—the plantation where her husband, Paul D, she, and others were enslaved—an experience she painfully remembers, especially with the return of Paul D. The men stole Sethe's breast milk. Of the painful memory Sethe says, "I am too full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down" (83). Sethe's experiences of slavery and of memory are intimately linked to her position as a woman and mother. Mathieson notes that "The memory of the milk violently wrested from her breasts by the mossy-toothed nephew of Schoolmaster haunts Sethe, continually recalling the brutal degradations foisted upon a female slave and her own inability to provide her children freely with all" (10). Mathieson's analysis helps illuminate the bridge between memory and the maternal in the novel: Sethe's

identities as a mother and as a former slave are inextricable. She thus experiences memories and “rememories” of past pain and trauma as a mother. Given that memory as a whole in the novel is centered around Sethe’s character, memory in the novel, then, is centered around the maternal.

Memory is gendered even for female characters who do not engage in as traditionally female activities as breastfeeding. For example, Pilate perhaps more than any other character is a driving maternal force in *Song of Solomon*. Her outlook—I argue her distinctly female outlook, because it is one concerned with ancestral connection and cultural heritage—informs her relationship with memory. Familial love or at least respect for other human beings drives nearly everything Pilate does. She is also intimately connected to her past and to her cultural heritage. Critic Valerie Smith writes that “instead of repressing the past, [Pilate] carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories and her bag of bones. She believes that one’s sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough simply to put it behind one and look forward” (729). Unlike her brother Macon, Pilate does not try to move away from or overcome her past. Instead, she introduces it into her present and into her mothering. For example, early in the novel Hagar upsets Reba and Pilate, saying that she’s sometimes “been hungry” for another sort of life. In response, Pilate sings the song of their family: “Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead: *O Sugarman don’t leave me here*” (49). Here, Pilate reacts to her daughter and granddaughter’s discomfort, and as their mother she soothes them. She could have done so through any number of methods: offering food, talking to them, hugging them. Yet, her choice to sing, and specifically to sing their family’s song, grounds her motherly identity in memory and familial past.

Who is She? Forming The Maternal Gatekeeper of Memory

Before delving further into an exploration of maternal gatekeepers, it is important to make clear exactly who they are and what they are doing in the novels. In their introductory essay to a collection on feminism and cultural memory, critics Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith write, “Feminist art and scholarship have worked to restore to hegemonic cultural memory the stories that have been forgotten or erased... But feminism has done more. It has defamiliarized and thus re-envisioned traditional modes of knowing the past” (11). Through this lens of feminist restoration and re-envisioning of memory, we can begin to understand characters such as *Song of Solomon*’s Pilate and *Beloved*’s Sethe and even—elsewhere in this essay— Paul D and Ruth. Mothers acting as gatekeepers of memory are figures who must remember and reckon with the past, and, in doing so, affect the present, future, and memory itself. This is why I use the term “gatekeepers.” These maternal figures do more than remember the past. They shape memory and give way for other characters to access to their memories and memory more generally throughout the novels. These maternal characters are in the position of gatekeeping memory not because they choose to, but because they must.

In *Song of Solomon*, the paternal is central to the work, but as previously noted, the maternal is deeply important in the novel, acting, I argue, as an absent center. The maternal is an absent center, because although the novel’s center appears to be around the paternal, fathers cannot fill that central role. Fathers so often fly away, escape, do not reckon with or connect to the past. In doing so, they can neither be there for their children, nor—particularly in the case of Macon Dead— present them with a productive worldview or connection to the past. Mothers, then, must fill in this absent center. The center is doubly absent because the fathers leave it so

and because the overt focus is on fathers. Mother figures, not fathers, must take on the role of centering and grounding the novel's journey.

Throughout the text, Pilate acts as a significant mother figure and a character for whom memory and the past are deeply important. She is essential to much of the novel's action, present at many crucial moments, bringing a maternal character into the center of a presumably paternal story. In the final, breathtaking pages of the novel Milkman is stricken by loss when Pilate is shot. Morrison writes, "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. 'There must be another one like you,' he whispered to her. 'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'" (336). Pilate is singular both in her novel and, at the risk of being presumptuous, I would argue, in the canon of American literature. Milkman's statements point to the significance and uniqueness of Pilate and these sorts of characters. In a novel where men can escape and transcend hardship through flight, in a culture touched by racial oppression and trauma, Pilate, too, transcends. If men can fly away, someone must stay, and that must be the women, the mothers, forced to deal with the present and the painful past. But, as Milkman says, she does not leave the ground like her male counterparts. How she achieves this is through memory, through a deep connection to and reckoning with the past. For example, she is quite literally carrying the bones of her father, a parcel which in many ways sparks the main journey in the novel. Though she believes them to be those of a white man for much of her life, she is still carrying with her the weight of the past and taking it on as her own. She brings the past into her present. Through Milkman, these memories continue into the future.

On his return home from his ancestral journey, Milkman goes to Pilate to tell her what he's learned about the family; As a maternal gatekeeper, Pilate first teaches him to own the past.

Pilate knocks him unconscious and leaves him in the cellar to realize that Hagar died. Milkman “knew what Pilate’s version of punishment was when somebody took another person’s life... Pilate would put him someplace near something that remained of the life he had taken, so he could *have* it” (332). Milkman knows that Pilate lives by the rule, “You can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (332). This moment must be read in conversation with the knowledge of fathers who fly away. Owning a life, claiming a memory rather than flying from it and transcending it, is Pilate’s way of reckoning with the past. She takes on a dead man’s bones, dragging the memory with her throughout her life. Now, she will move Milkman to do the same with Hagar, not only forcing him to drag around the “bones” of his actions but also altering the progression of memory in the novel. Had Pilate kept all reminders of Hagar for herself—the granddaughter’s possessions or hair— she would have laid the girl to rest in the past. However, Milkman takes a box of her hair, to own her, to own her memory the way Pilate would. Pilate owns memory; she is grounded with the past, but this is what makes her different, what makes her a gatekeeper of memory.

Sethe in *Beloved* is also a mother acting as gatekeeper of memory but in ways different than Pilate. *Beloved* is, in large part, about slavery and its effects, so the memories of slavery reverberate throughout the novel. Memory haunts Sethe. Her home holds the spirit of the daughter she killed to protect her from slavery. For Sethe and the novel as a whole, death is not final. The past is not passed. Memory, then, is not linear, and the past lingers as a part of the present. In a poignant comment on the nature of memory, Sethe explains her own relationship with the past and time:

I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it is gone, but the place—the picture of it stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world... Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (43)

In her essay “Memory and Mother Love in Morrison’s *Beloved*” Barbara Offutt Mathieson analyzes this excerpt writing, “Every lovely thing remembered is a source of searing pain... The past lingers like a terrible trap to enmesh the unwary who attempt to revisit it” (7). Mathieson’s interpretation is certainly believable. Sethe’s memories are often traumatic and painful, so memory is most likely “a source of searing pain.” However, I would also argue that beyond memory creating “searing pain” in Sethe’s life, memory and Sethe’s understanding of it define her life. If she lives in a world where past is not passed, where “rememory” can be “bump[ed] into” and where the child she killed haunts her home, memory is not a mere concept, but a force.

Furthermore, as Sethe is the main character of the novel, the main person who configures and contextualizes memory, her ideas about memory and her identity collide to build the memory structure of the novel. Her previously referenced ideas about “rememory” can, and I argue should, be read into the rest of the novel. In the same passage about rememory, Denver asks Sethe if other people can experience a rememory: “Can other people see it?... Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes... It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (43). Sethe understands memory to be a powerful presence not just in the life of the individual, but

relationally. Therefore, later in the novel when Beloved appears at 124 and Morrison leaves ambiguous whether or not she is some sort of hallucination, whether she is “real,” Sethe has already answered. If other people can “see it,” can “bump into” a “rememory,” then Beloved is just as real as the baby was over a decade before. In this way, Sethe, like Pilate, shapes and grapples with memory for herself and other characters in the novel; they both act as maternal gatekeepers of memory.

On Paul D

Paul D complicates the role of the maternal figure, because he takes on a maternal sort of masculinity by the novel’s end. In *Beloved*’s final pages, he becomes a male gatekeeper of memory. Paul D is a gatekeeper of memory first because he brings to Sethe memories she did not know, did not want to know, but now must incorporate into her memories. She did not know before Paul D’s arrival that her husband Halle witnessed and was destroyed by her assault. Sethe asked, “He saw?” Paul D answered, “He saw” (81). Although Sethe is hurt by this new memory, she takes it on, bringing Paul D into the category of memory gatekeeper. Adding more memories into Sethe’s life alone is not enough for Paul D to qualify as a gatekeeper of memory. However, given that this sort of character not only remembers, but also shapes memory, Paul D can be read as a gatekeeper of memory. Though he is not at this early moment a “maternal” character, he does play a role in Sethe’s memory structure and in the presence of memories in the novel.

By the end of the novel, Paul D decides to stay with Sethe, a decision which I argue marks his transition into a gatekeeper of memory with a maternal masculinity. Unlike many of the male characters in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*—fathers who fly away and sons who run away—Paul D returns to Sethe. In the final pages of the novel, Morrison contrasts Paul D’s past

wanderings and escapes with his choice to stay with Sethe. Morrison writes, “In five tries he had not had one permanent success. Every one of his escapes (from Sweet Home, from Brandywine, from Alfred, Georgia, from Wilmington, from Northpoint) had been frustrated” (316). After the Civil War, Paul D continues to drift, enjoying small tastes of newfound freedom until he decides to “come home” to Sethe: “He decided that to eat, walk and sleep anywhere was life as good as it got... Now his coming is the reverse of his going” (318). Morrison begins these pages with an account of Paul D’s former wanderings and thus establishes a point of contrast for the line “Now his coming is the reverse of his going” (318). Paul D could have— and previously— followed the path of escape many of Morrison’s men take. The earlier lines in this section are filled with language of departure: “his escapes,” “had not had one *permanent* success,” and the decision to live “anywhere.” However, the line “now his coming is the reverse of his going” provides a reversal not only of this journey, but also of the role of male departure.

Paul D’s decision to come home to 124 in combination with his final conversation with Sethe reveals in him a maternal masculinity. Thus, he becomes a gatekeeper of memory and complicates gender roles in Morrison’s work. If Paul D’s choice to remain at 124 signals that he is operating outside of certain masculine norms, his final conversation with Sethe illustrates this new identity. When Paul D returns to 124, he finds Sethe devastated and weakened by her time with Beloved. Wanting Sethe to live, to work through her traumatic past, Paul D assumes the role of caretaker. First, Paul D offers to bathe Sethe: “I’m a take care of you, you hear? Starting now. First off, you don’t smell right. Stay there. Don’t move. Let me heat up some water” (320). Though Paul D still identifies as masculine—he even notes that Sethe “left him his manhood”— he assumes the traditionally female and motherly role of caretaking (322). Offering to bathe

Sethe, to care for her physical being, echoes a mother caring for a child; specifically, it echoes Baby Suggs doing the same thing years earlier. He does so with tenderness and with love. Gone are any male tendencies to run or to leave the difficult task of working through a tough situation to women. Just as Sethe has cared for her children the best way she could, Paul D now cares for her.

If maternal gatekeepers of memory are motherly characters who not only must remember the past, but also reckon with it and in so doing shape the present and future, here Paul D fully transitions into this role. He begins the difficult task of comforting, of soothing, of helping Sethe through her pain. Paul D says, “Aw, girl. Don’t cry.” “She was my best thing,” Sethe responds (321). Finally, “‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’... ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are’” (322). Earlier in the novel, Paul D brings and shapes memory and rejects the male decision to leave. Now, he takes on the maternal role of reckoning with the past and with trauma. As critic Kristen Lillvis writes, “Paul D asks Sethe to consider building a future with him as she continues the work of healing from her traumatic past... The bridge Paul D builds between yesterday’s experiences and tomorrow’s promises transforms the final chapter” (452). Female characters like Sethe and Pilate and Ruth deal with the past out of necessity and somehow work through or around it. In helping Sethe with her trauma, Paul D adopts this responsibility and presents a path forward; he acknowledges their shared “yesterday” and the need for “some kind of tomorrow.” Thus, Paul D fulfills the role of maternal gatekeeper of memory, providing a character who exists outside some of the gender roles Morrison builds. In a novel with a traumatized mother at its center, a male character can help her reckon with the past.

On Macon Dead

Although Paul D is a male counterpart to the female role of mediator of memory, in *Song of Solomon* there is no such male character. Pilate and Ruth are central to both Milkman's journey and to the overall tone and meaning of the novel. On one level, *Song* is the story of the paternal. However, as previously explained, mothers work as an absent center in the novel. I will argue that even though Macon Dead is the main father figure in the story, he cannot act as that center. He cannot be a mediator of memory, the past, or of cultural heritage. Macon values material things and ownership as a sign of success. His gold is fool's gold; Pilate's is memory. He is convinced that the bag of bones in Pilate's home is gold, but it is not. Like fool's gold can, the lure of a shiny nugget of wealth tricks a materialist. However, the sack is filled with bones, with the past, turning gold into memory. Macon's mistake when juxtaposed with Pilate's actions reveals his misplaced values. In her essay on the women of *Song of Solomon*, Soophia Ahmad explains Pilate's values:

Pilate is possessive only about her bag of bones, her geography book, the rocks she has collected from each place she visited during her twenty years of wandering, and her name which she wears in an earring made out of her mother's brass snuff box. These objects, and the owner's reverence toward them, indicate her strong ties to her past, and her veneration of the culture that shaped her. (66)

Unlike Macon, Pilate does not value material things, except possessions that carry personal and familial significance. Her bag of bones ties her to past actions—and later to the memory of her father, the bones of her family. Her geography book and rocks connect her to the places of her past, and her earring links her to her mother and to the significance of her own name. Each

object is valuable for its relationship to the past and to Pilate's identity. They can be seen not as part of the many memento morii of literature, but rather as a group of memento memoriae, reminders of memory.

Macon, however, is Pilate's foil here, treasuring not memory or the past but instead wealth; In a plot built on the importance of heritage, he can serve neither as a gatekeeper of memory, nor as a center of the novel. Pilate and other maternal figures are the absent center of this paternal story. Macon is so focused on material success, on gaining a monetary advantage in a culture where for so long African Americans were denied even the slightest opportunity for economic advancement, that he sees his relationships with other people and even with his own past differently than Pilate. Macon informs Milkman that Pilate "can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe in the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things... Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Macon believes he is giving his son useful advice, giving him the knowledge and outlook necessary for success. While Macon's perspective is understandable—material wealth allows a measure of security—he is mistaken about what it can mean to "own yourself and other people too." For Macon, to own another person is to have power over them, and to own one's self is to have possessions. Yet, as Pilate ultimately teaches Milkman, to own a person is to take responsibility for the wrongs you've committed against them, to literally carry on their memory whether in a sack of bones or a box of hair. Owning oneself, then, could be to own one's culture and past, to commit to memory one's heritage. A gatekeeper of memory must therefore be central to the novel, not a materialistic man.

Macon does not have the same value for human life, the past, or understand ownership the way Pilate does and the way Milkman learns to by the end of the novel. The final lines of the novel can therefore be read in two ways: with Macon's ideals and with Pilate's. Pilate "integrates her ethnicity into her present lifestyle and, by selecting emotional treasures over material wealth" Ahmad writes, "braces herself against the onslaught of Western materialism that Macon Dead's family is prey to" (67). She braces herself, and Milkman, against the desire to own someone for power. Instead, she operates from the belief in owning the past and taking responsibility for other people and their memories. Thus, the reference to ownership on the final page of the novel is twofold. First, there is Macon's definition of ownership, then Pilate's. At the end of Milkman's confrontation with Guitar, he asks, "'You want me? Huh? You want my life?' ... 'You want my life?' Milkman was not shouting now. 'You need it? Here.'" (337). Milkman then leaps towards Guitar, possibly towards his own death. This moment is filled with the language of ownership. Milkman is asking Guitar if he "wants" and "needs" to have his life and then gives it to him. For Macon, this would mean that Guitar has power over Milkman. However, it seems that Milkman is working from Pilate's definition. Through giving his life over to Guitar, he may be trying to make Guitar take responsibility for his death and memory just as Pilate did for the white man and as Milkman did for Hagar. Guitar might "need" to take Milkman's life for material reasons—murdering his former friend for the gold he believes he took—but Milkman can insist that he own it, too. In Milkman's bold last words, he channels Pilate and her determination to own a dead person's life, a dead person's memory. Her version of ownership wins out over Macon's.

Mother Time

Time and memory are inherently linked. If maternal characters are mediators of memory, ultimately they alter temporality in the novels. Mothers must find a way to reconcile the past with the present and push memory forward into the future. In doing so, they affect time itself. The meandering timeline in *Beloved* serves as a reflection of memory in the novel. Sethe's character is haunted by her past and her memories. In *Beloved*, narrative structure and maternal memory intersect through the novel's altered temporal structure. *Song of Solomon*, too, has a timeline marked by the weight of, and a journey into, the past. In both novels, maternal characters and their memories disrupt a linear sense of time. However, *Beloved*'s timeline is more fractured, reflecting Sethe's memory, which is haunted by trauma; *Song of Solomon*'s is more cyclical, revolving around the past over which Pilate and other female characters take ownership and value.

In *Beloved*, the traumatic past has impacted identity and memory and thus has impacted time as well. In her book *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes of *Beloved*, "Familial structures in this novel are profoundly distorted by the institution of slavery"; so, too, are temporal structures (6). The institution broke up, traumatized, and harmed many families, leaving members of the African American community haunted by their past. Hirsch then explains that the novel "contains the stories that...form and surround the relationship of mother and daughter during slavery and in post-abolition times... As long as [Sethe] can continue telling her stories and explaining her actions, the relationship continues" (7). Hirsch's argument not only highlights how the affects of slavery are both of the past and the present, but also shows how Sethe's memories of *Beloved* and of slavery bring the past into the present. For many years, *Beloved*'s ghost haunts 124, forcing the home's inhabitants to live with a constant reminder of

past trauma. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, rejects the idea of moving to escape the ghost: "What'd be the point?" asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (6). Families living with the legacy of slavery, with the memories of their and their loved one's time as slaves, live in a present constantly infused with the past. Therefore, time in *Beloved* is as fluid as memory itself, weaving in and out of scenes in the present and scenes in the past. Sethe's memories are still fresh as well as moments of the past. For example, Baby Suggs is not alive in the present of the novel, but as evidenced by the above quote and many other scenes, the other characters still feel her presence in their lives. Throughout the novel, Sethe's relationship with her memories complicates time.

When Sethe finally decides that Beloved is back from the dead, her burden as gatekeeper of Beloved's memory seems eased. Yet, the daughter's return can also be understood as Sethe further weaving the past into the present. The morning after she realizes Beloved is back, Sethe is filled with happiness and relief from the agony of memory. Morrison writes, "Sethe was excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember... Sethe walked to work, late for the first time in sixteen years and wrapped in a timeless present" (216-17). As mother of a child she murdered and a woman whose motherly identity is shaped in part by trauma, Sethe bears the burden of remembering her painful past for herself and children. Her husband is gone, so he cannot remember. Her sons ran away, so they cannot remember. Only Sethe can and must reckon with the memories of her past. With Beloved's return, she believes she is freed of this task. She believes she "no longer ha[s] to remember" and can finally live in a "timeless present."

Ironically, a constant reminder of of the past in the form of a resurrected child convinces Sethe that she could shake the burden of memory. However, Beloved herself is in many ways a

living piece of memory and the past. Barbara Offutt Mathieson, writing of “Memory and Mother Love in Morrison’s *Beloved*,” identifies Beloved herself as an embodiment of the past. “Sethe,” she writes, “is able to abandon memories here because her past, embodied in Beloved, has forcibly reentered the present. Yet *past* remains” (12). Past does indeed remain present, because if Beloved embodies the past and memory, then Sethe is not escaping memory or the past. She is instead living in both the present and the past, living with a physical version of her memories. Only at the novel’s end, after Beloved is gone, when Paul D tells Sethe that they “need some kind of tomorrow,” is there an inkling of a more linear future, leaving memories in the past.

Though the characters in *Song of Solomon* are not haunted by memory, the novel takes on a cyclical timeline as Milkman journeys into his family’s past and brings his findings back to his present. Morrison signals the cyclical journey of the plot through several aspects of the novel. The story is bookended with flight, first Mr. Smith’s and then Milkman’s; Milkman travels from North to South and then back North again; Pilate’s song appears during the beginning, middle, and near the end of the novel. Each cyclical aspect brings Milkman and his family closer to an ancestral, Southern past and is woven through with memory. The men of the novel share and are part of many of these cycled through memories, but the women reveal and pass on the significant memories. Ruth spins the threads of a Southern past into a young Milkman. Pilate holds the bones that spark the journey. Circe—a woman who seems to simultaneously possess, command, and live outside of time and memory—gives Milkman significant details of Pilate’s and Macon’s past. Susan Byrd’s information combined with Pilate’s song allows Milkman to piece together the string of memories, to complete the past. Therefore, the maternal keepers of memory build the cyclical temporality in novel. When he returns to Pilate’s home and is greeted with the

consequences of Hagar's death, Milkman thinks of connections to his family's history: "What difference did it make? He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead—he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet's slivery voice came back to him: 'who'd he leave behind?'" (332). Finally, Milkman returns to the present, bringing with him the details of his family's past and returns home to Pilate to complete the cycle. Morrison provides in Milkman's actions a mirror of his great-grandfather's, a re-issuing of the past.

Conclusion

Throughout her works, Toni Morrison writes of communities fractured by trauma, families living with painful pasts. Memory in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is a dominant force in the characters' lives and in their stories. In cultures where men have the opportunity to run or fly away, women are left behind to deal with the trauma and reckon with the past. Therefore, memory becomes gendered, and Morrison writes characters who act as maternal gatekeepers of memory. These gatekeepers mediate memory out of necessity and ultimately shape memory, its meaning for the other characters, and time itself. The question, then, may become what Morrison makes of memory. To put it simply, is memory a good thing or a bad thing? Perhaps the answer these two novels provide, in classic Morrison fashion, is that it is more complicated than one or the other. Memory can be painful but also offers a way into and through the past, into identity, into the future.

Works Cited

- Ahmad, Soophia. "Women Who Make a Man: Female Protagonists in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *Atenea*, vol. 28, no. 2, Dec. 2008, pp. 59-73. Print.
- Altınay, Ayşe Gül and Andrea Petó. "Gender, Memory and Connective Genocide Scholarship: A Conversation with Marianne Hirsch." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, Nov. 2015, pp. 386-396. Print.
- Frampton, Edith. "From the Nobel to Oprah: Toni Morrison, Body Politics, and Oprah's Book Club." *Stories of Oprah: The Oprahfication of American Culture*. By Trystan T. Cotton and Kimberly Springer. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2010. 145-59. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother-daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- Hirsch, Marianne and Valerie Smith. "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, Sept. 2002, p. 1-17. Print.
- Lillvis, Kristen. "Becoming Self and Mother: Posthuman Liminality in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, no. 4, 2013, p. 452-464. Print.
- Mathieson, Barbara O. "Memory and Mother Love in Morrison's *Beloved*." *American Imago*, vol. 47, no. 1, Spr 1990, pp. 1-21. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. Print.
- Smith, Valerie. "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *The Southern Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1985, pp. 721-732.