

2018

“A Pool of Red and Undulating Light”: Supernaturalism and Trauma in Morrison’s Novels

Rachel Karp
Skidmore College, rkarp@skidmore.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Karp, Rachel, “A Pool of Red and Undulating Light”: Supernaturalism and Trauma in Morrison’s Novels” (2018). *English Honors Theses*. 15.
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol/15

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.

Skidmore College

“A pool of red and undulating light”:
Supernaturalism and Trauma in Morrison’s Novels

Rachel Karp

Toni Morrison Senior Capstone

Professor Stokes

1 December 2017

On the coast of Ghana, West Africa, amidst small fishing villages and stunning views of sand and sea, there sits a crumbling, stone building called Fort Prizenstein. It is one of many slave fortresses that line the coast of West Africa, marking a multitude of starting-points of the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade. Above a gaping hole in the outer wall of this fort, inscribed in black paint, read the following words: *“Welcome for spiritual reconnection with ancestors who were brutally uprooted from their natural abode and ferried to Americas via the numerous breath taking gate of no return.”* Whether or not you believe in ghosts or an afterlife, these words ring true. Fort Prizenstein must be a place of “spiritual reconnection,” of supernatural presence. It seems impossible that so many human beings could have been torn from their homes to be enslaved, abused, and even murdered in a far-away land without leaving so much as a trace behind. This trauma permeates the stone walls and the sandy floor of Fort Prizenstein, lingering in the collective consciousness of visitors.

Toni Morrison’s novels are vessels for the supernatural just as the walls of Fort Prizenstein are. In both cases, the reader or the visitor does not need to believe in an objective reality in which ghosts and magic exist to feel the presence of the supernatural. Supernaturalism, rather, is a tool for understanding and healing trauma. Even still, it may be difficult for the average American reader or visitor to accept the presence of supernaturalism in Morrison’s works. This is because, as Bonnie Winsbro, in her book *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women*, points out, many novels by “Ethnic Women” “reflect a view of reality that differs significantly from that presented by the previously established literary canon” (4). Morrison’s novels are among such works that incorporate elements of supernaturalism not found in the so-called literary canon. Many of

these novels draw upon the beliefs and mythologies of certain ethnic groups in the United States who “have been rendered powerless through decimation of their numbers, through enslavement, through an externally imposed silence and invisibility, and through a process of colonization” (Winsbro 5). Arguably, much of the U.S. population is unaccustomed to contact with African beliefs in the supernatural because slavery and systematic racism have eradicated them. Thus, as readers, we must put aside whatever preconceived notions you may have about the supernatural and open your mind to the way in which Toni Morrison uses elements of supernaturalism to address individual and cultural trauma in her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Both novels address horrors so awful they are impossible to comprehend through a traditionally realistic lens, as canonical literature has defined realism. Morrison weaves magic and supernaturalism into national and individual histories to reveal and heal what would otherwise be too painful to examine. In doing so, she undermines the very politics that have historically constructed our conception of reality. Morrison presents her readers with an alternate reality, in which the power dynamics of gender and race operate differently.

At its most basic level, it is possible to read *Song of Solomon* as a piece of purely realistic literature that reinforces a multitude of common stereotypes. On the surface, the novel may seem simply to be about black men who run away, leaving their women to pine, or even die of suffering. Macon and Pilate’s father is dead, and their father’s father is absent, too. Macon is absent from his son Milkman’s life, and Milkman too abandons the woman who loves him, Hagar. Hagar dies shortly thereafter; the last sentence she utters in the novel is “[Milkman]’s never going to like my hair” (316). Hagar, it would seem, is the epitome of the woman left behind, who dies of grief over her absent lover. These absent male figures leave behind an

undeniable trauma on the individual. Furthermore, these absences can be tied to the collective, cultural trauma left behind by slavery. However, Morrison writes such narratives only to complicate and subvert them through the supernatural.

Morrison draws upon African mythology and religious belief in order to alter the reality she initially constructs in *Song of Solomon*. In *Song of Solomon*, the supernatural often takes the form of flight. Morrison alludes to real myths, stories, and historic accounts of men and women who flew back to Africa after being taken from their homes as slaves. Such texts include Esteban Montejo's *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* and the black folktale *The People Could Fly*. In *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Montejo writes,

Some people said that when a Negro died he went back to Africa, but this is a lie. How could a dead man go back to Africa? It was living men who flew there, from a tribe the Spanish stopped importing as slaves because so many of them flew away that it was bad for business. (Montejo 131)

Montejo is referring, perhaps, to the same men that *The People Could Fly* depicts. Virginia Hamilton's telling of *The People Could Fly* begins, "They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields" (166). As the story goes, many of these Africans were taken to America as slaves, but escaped, flying "away to *Free-dom*" (Hamilton 172). These narratives of flight amongst the enslaved were perhaps a means of comprehending the trauma of being torn from their homes in Africa. The belief that some were able to fly home, across the cast Atlantic, collapsed the distance between Africa and America, providing a glimmer of hope.

Song of Solomon begins with flight. Morrison's epigraph to the novel reads, "*The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names.*" Before the story has even begun, before we have any conception of what the plot will be, we know flight will be an important element. Morrison utilizes careful, specific word choice in her epigraph. She writes, "The fathers *may* soar," rather than "the fathers *might* soar." The use of the word "may" instead of "might" tells us that the fathers already have a supernatural ability to fly, not that there is a possibility of them one day flying.

In addition to the novel beginning with an epigraph about flight, the narrative itself starts with the following sentence: "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" (Morrison 3). As the chapter unfolds, we see this insurance agent jump from the roof of Mercy hospital, framed by "wide blue wings," as a woman in the crowd sings,

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home... (6)

To the reader familiar only with the traditional canon of realism, this scene reads as a suicide. Similarly, to the young onlookers raised in the free state of North Carolina, such as Freddie, "Mr. Smith went splat!" (23). However, to readers and characters familiar with African mythology and belief, Mr. Smith's leap from the top of Mercy hospital takes on a new, supernatural meaning. Pilate's song references mythology such as *The People Could Fly*, describing a man who flies away across the sky, home to Africa. Lorna McDaniel, in her essay

entitled “The Flying Africans: The Extent and Strength of Myth in the Americas,” points out that often, in African-American music referencing flight, “the texts speak not of suicide, but of running away, fleeing from betrayal and from the terror of a strained and repressive context” (34). Morrison herself seems to point us toward this supernatural reading. She ends Mr. Smith’s brief section of the novel with the following: “Mr. Smith had seen the rose petals, heard the music, and leaped on into the air” (9). In doing so, Morrison leaves Mr. Smith suspended; we do not see him hit the ground. This allows for the possibility that he really did fly back home to Africa, just as Sugarman does in Pilate’s song. In this reading, Mr. Smith’s leap is not a suicide or an abandonment of children and wife and home, but rather a return home, to Africa. Morrison’s suggestion of Mr. Smith’s leap as an act of flight dissolves some of the trauma presented by his suicide. This is the first of many examples of Morrison linking traumatic events to supernatural ones.

While many readers may not be convinced that Mr. Smith’s leap from the top of Mercy is an act of supernaturalism, Morrison continues to link trauma with the supernatural, slowly eroding the laws of realism as we know them. Thus, by the time Milkman learns of his grandfather’s ability to fly, we as readers have no choice but to accept this as true. Denise Heinze, in her book *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness,”* states, “Solomon refuses to defer to a preconceived reality” by incorporating a multitude of instances of supernaturalism (166). Heinze goes on to explain that “These events are so numerous in *Solomon* that reality and fantasy are indistinguishable and the beleaguered reader has little recourse but to accept the fantastic as an established corollary to the real world” (166). One such example of these instances of supernaturalism is the water mark on Ruth’s table. Morrison transforms this

seemingly ordinary mark into an extraordinary one. Ruth sees the water mark as a sign of her deceased father's life, and "even in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she felt its presence" (Morrison 11). While Ruth outwardly expresses a desire to get rid of it, she secretly depends on its presence, looking at it every time she enters the room. Morrison writes, Ruth's "glance was nutritious; the spot became, if anything, more pronounced as the years passed" (12). While this passage can be read merely as an example of Morrison's frequent and artful use of extended metaphor and heightened language, it serves also to introduce us to the realm of the supernatural. The idea that Ruth's own gaze causes the water mark to darken and grow begins to construct a paradigm in which the laws of reality as we know them operate differently.

In a world where water marks can grow of their own accord, as signs from the dead, it is easier for readers and characters alike to accept the presence of ghosts and other supernatural events. As the novel progresses, Morrison references ghosts with more and more frequency. Early in the novel, Freddie tells Milkman, "Ghosts killed my mother. I didn't see that, of course, but I seen 'em since" (109). Milkman is initially willing to believe Freddie, and Freddie goes on to tell Milkman the story of the white ghost bull who killed his mother. When Milkman laughs at Freddie's story, Freddie says "...they's a lot of strange things you don't know nothing about, boy" (110). Such allusions to the presence of ghosts and other "strange things" allow Morrison to construct a world in which trauma manifests itself in tangible examples of the supernatural.

Having already undermined the logic of reality, Morrison can now show us how the supernatural can heal the wounds left by trauma. The primary trauma Morrison explores in *Song of Solomon* is present in Milkman's storyline and the cyclical nature of absent male figures

in his family lineage. While the absent male figures in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* leave behind an undeniable trauma on the individual, they can also be tied to the larger, cultural trauma left behind by slavery. Ron Eyerman, in his book *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity*, defines cultural trauma as follows:

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, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. (2)

While most of the characters in *Song of Solomon* were born long after slavery gripped the nation, many experience the loss of identity associated with the cultural trauma of slavery. When Milkman asks his father, Macon Dead, "Your father was a slave?" his father retorts, "What kind of foolish question is that? Course he was. Who hadn't been in 1869? They all had to register. Free and not free. Free and used-to-be-slaves" (53). Macon Dead carries with him a mark of cultural trauma in his own name; Macon's father was also called Macon Dead, a name which had been ascribed to him when he registered with the Freedman's Bureau when slavery was abolished. The white man working at the bureau was drunk and wrote Macon's name down incorrectly, thus bestowing him with the legal name 'Macon Dead.' Macon Dead passed this name down to his eldest son. The history of Macon Dead Jr.'s name deeply corrodes his sense of self and, arguably, renders him incapable of being entirely present in his own son's life. Thus, Milkman too experiences the repercussions of the trauma of slavery. From a very young age, Milkman wishes to fly and, when at four years old, he discovers "only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself" (9). Milkman feels uninterested in himself knowing he

is tied to the ground. This loss of interest in his own identity is a recognizable mark of cultural trauma. Milkman's desire for flight marks a desire for an identity that transcends the limitations set by the reality of being a black man in a country still haunted by slavery.

Under the guise of searching for gold, Milkman spends much of the novel searching for some semblance of the identity he lost to cultural trauma. This leads him to the town of Shalimar, where he discovers that his great-grandfather allegedly "flew away," which Milkman initially takes to mean "died or ran off" (304). Were Morrison's novel to match the narratives presented by much of canonical realism, Milkman would be correct. However, this is not the case, and in Morrison's world Milkman goes to Susan Byrd for more information. Byrd calls Jake, Milkman's grandfather "one of those flying African children...one of Solomon's children" (321). She explains that many of the "old folks" believe "Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa" (322). Milkman, still in disbelief, asks, "'When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?'" to which Byrd replies "No, I mean flew. Oh, it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying... Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (323). While Susan Byrd labels the account of Solomon's flight as "foolish," she is invested in communicating to Milkman the whole story. At this point in the novel, we as readers, as well as Milkman as a character, have grown accustomed to the presence of the supernatural. It is very much a part of the world Morrison has constructed. Like Mr. Smith's flight at the beginning of the novel, Solomon's flight is an antithesis to the stereotype of black men who abandon their homes and families. By constructing a paradigm of the supernatural in which Solomon truly did fly to Africa, his departure represents a return home rather than an abandonment of home.

Furthermore, the act of flight reverses racial power dynamics; it grants black men a power far greater than that of white men. Milkman's realization of this begins to heal the wounds left by his own absent father, his grandfather's death, his great-grandfather's absence, and even slavery itself.

While Solomon's power of flight subverts racial power dynamics and combats the stereotype of black men who abandon home, it does not account for the female characters left behind. To an extent, Solomon's flight even reinforces gendered stereotypes about men and women. For much of the novel, it would seem Morrison has reserved the power of flight for men, paralleling the gendered politics of reality. However, at the conclusion of the novel, Morrison manages to undermine this gender norm that she herself has illustrated so eloquently. In doing so, she proves that the laws of supernaturalism transcend the politics of reality. As Pilate, after being accidentally shot by Guitar, lies dying, Milkman reflects: "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). In the last few pages of the novel, Morrison reveals her female protagonist, Pilate, has been soaring all along. The version of flight that Milkman recognizes in Pilate looks different than Solomon's flight and the flight present in African mythology. Pilate's flight is a metaphorical one. In suggesting that Pilate flew "without ever leaving the ground," Morrison implies she achieves the same freedom that flight grants Solomon: freedom from the bindings of reality and its gendered and racial power dynamics (336).

While Pilate's flight is not explicitly supernatural in that she does not literally leave the ground, she derives her freedom from her own unwavering belief in the supernaturalism.

Unlike Milkman, who is hesitant to believe in ghosts at the outset of the novel, Pilate lives in a world in which the supernatural is a prevalent piece of her everyday life. Pilate sees and speaks to her dead father throughout the novel. She tells Ruth, referring to her father, "not only did I see him die, I seen him since he was shot...Macon seen him too. After he buried him....He's helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know" (140-141). In another instance, Pilate places a frightening doll on Macon's chair in his office to keep him away from Ruth. Macon tries to burn it, but "it [takes] nine separate burnings before the fire [gets] down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides" (132). Morrison creates a vivid image of Macon dousing this doll in alcohol and lighting it on fire nine times before it begins to disintegrate. According to the laws of science and reality as we know them, the dead do not speak and a tiny, cotton doll, doused in alcohol would burn immediately. Pilate, however, is not bound by the laws of science, nor is she bound by politics of race and gender. She wields immense power over the men in her life, frightening Macon and protecting Ruth.

Pilate seems to derive her power from her own belief in a world which differs from that of canonical realism. She says at one point, "Macon kept telling me that the things we was scared of wasn't real. What difference do it make if the thing you scared of is real or not?" (41). We see that mindset in action when Pilate tells of the man she almost saved from falling off a cliff in his mind. Pilate sees that the man appears ill and goes to him. He tells her he is trying to keep from falling off the cliff so she offers to hold onto him to keep him from falling. Although she herself cannot see the cliff, she remembers what it feels like to be afraid of something others deem imaginary. However, when his wife walks in and sees them together, Pilate lets go. Pilate, describing the man's immediate death, says, "I swear it took him three minutes, three

whole minutes to go from a standing upright position to when he mashed his face on the floor. I don't know if the cliff was real or not, but it took him three minutes to fall down it" (42). Pilate has a profound understanding of the power of belief. She says to Ruth, "Some folks want to live forever. Some don't. I believe they decide on it anyway. People die when they want to and if they want to. Don't nobody have to die if they don't want to" (140). Pilate's refusal to change her own belief system to match what others think gives her immense power. She is not even bound by life and death. When Pilate does die at the end of the novel, her words to Ruth echo. As readers, we are reminded that perhaps Pilate does not want to live forever. Her going becomes a choice; even in death, Pilate maintains her power and agency.

Unlike in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison does nothing to ease her readers into the realm of supernatural in *Beloved*. Rather, Morrison plunges her readers into the supernatural headfirst. The beginning of *Beloved* is disorienting. The novel starts, "124 was spiteful. Full of a Baby's venom" (3). Immediately, we are flooded with questions. What is 124? How can it be "filled with a Baby's venom"? *Beloved* does not illustrate the image of reality that it strives to deconstruct, as *Song of Solomon* does. Rather, *Beloved* asks us to fill in these gaps ourselves. For the average contemporary American reader, it may take a few reads to grasp what is happening: that 124 is a house, that the Baby is full of venom because it is dead, that the baby's ghost lingers, reminding its mother and its siblings of its spitefulness.

However, like *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's *Beloved* draws upon African beliefs in a reality that is steeped in the supernatural. Winsbro aptly places *Beloved* in a world that "blends Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead with African religious belief in the behavior of the living-dead" (Winsbro 133). Considering these two belief systems, the appearance of

Beloved as the ghost of Sethe's murdered child, both in the small signs she leaves in 124 and in her eventual corporeal form, is not all that surprising. Drawing upon the work of John Mbiti, author of *African Religions and Philosophy*, Winsbro explains:

According to African belief, the living-dead—the spirits of the recently deceased, those who are still remembered by surviving family members and friends—are still part of their families, continue to live close to their homes, and frequently visit their surviving relatives. (133-134)

Beloved is a 'living-dead,' the spirit of the "blood-soaked child [Sethe] holds to her chest," murdered by her own mother in an attempt to save her from the horrors of slavery (175). Beloved makes her presence known, at first through small signs: "two tiny hand prints...in the cake," a "kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor," and "soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door" (3). This drives Sethe's two sons to run away and even causes Sethe herself to suggest they move from the haunted 124. To this, however, Baby Suggs responds "What'd be the point? ... Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky" (6). In this moment, Baby Suggs expresses her belief in the 'living-dead.' She paints a picture of national trauma, looming over the entire nation, lurking in the shadows, haunting.

In *Beloved*, it is a surplus of this trauma itself which generates the supernatural. The haunting of 124 and the eventual appearance of Beloved in her corporeal form are clear representations of the suffering Sethe has experienced in her own life. Sethe's memories of slavery, of her assault by schoolteacher and his men, of the way they beat her and "took [her]

milk,” overwhelm Sethe (20). When Paul D tells Sethe that her husband, Halle, was there in the barn during Sethe’s assault, Sethe wishes her brain could say “No thank you” to her awful memories. She thinks, “I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, I can’t go back and add more” (83). Sethe’s own body and mind are not large enough to hold all the trauma she has experienced. Thus, the memories which flood her brain overflow into another form: Beloved. These memories and experiences which construct Beloved are also what drove Sethe to kill her in first place; Sethe could have either allowed Beloved to be taken by the white men, forced into slavery, raped and beaten, or Sethe could have killed Beloved herself.

It would seem, however, that Beloved is more than just a manifestation of Sethe’s individual trauma. She ultimately comes to represent collective trauma, triggering different memories and experiences for different individuals. While Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver all identify the grief that lingers in 124 as the ghost of the baby Sethe killed, Paul D has a different experience when he first encounters it. Morrison describes Paul D first entering the house, following Sethe “through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood” (10). For Paul D, the pool of red light evokes memories of Sweet Home, of Mrs. Garner selling his brother, and schoolteacher arriving and breaking “three more Sweet Home men” and punching “the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes” (11). While Paul D seems to believe Sethe when she tells him it is the ghost of her daughter, he feels only its sadness as “a wave of grief” that “soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry” (11). In this moment, Paul D experiences not Sethe’s individual grief but rather a collective grief, the grief that Baby Suggs

previously described as lingering in every house in the country, the cultural trauma that propels Solomon's flight back to Africa and Mr. Smith's leap off the roof of Mercy Hospital.

The universality of *Beloved* as a representation of cultural trauma can be best understood, perhaps, by what *Beloved* becomes when she is no longer remembered by her loved ones. Sethe and Denver ascribe meaning and identity to *Beloved*. Sethe states, "*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" (236). Denver states, "*Beloved* is my sister" (Morrison 243). It is understandable that Sethe gives so much meaning to *Beloved*. Sethe has already expressed how full she is of traumatic memories. It is only natural that she would need to place some of these horrors somewhere else, somewhere outside of her own body, in order to cope. However, it forces us to question who *Beloved* would be on her own. What would she represent? As Winsbro writes, "Without the past and identity provided by Sethe, *Beloved* is any motherless child, any African-American female—she is nobody and everybody, nothing and all" (136). Winsbro describes an odd sort of cognitive dissonance, which Morrison beautifully illustrates at the conclusion of *Beloved*.

In her last few paragraphs, Morrison shows us who *Beloved* is without the memories of Sethe and Denver to construct some semblance of an identity for her. *Beloved* becomes no more than a pair of footprints that "come and go, come and go" (324). Morrison writes, "They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (324). In this instance, *Beloved* embodies the universality of the collective trauma she represents because the footprints she leaves in the snow fit adults and children alike. Simultaneously, however, *Beloved* is nothing

and nobody at all. Without someone to think of her every day, she vanishes, her footprints only appearing when someone comes along to place their feet in them.

We can make sense of this idea of Beloved as a representation of cultural trauma through African religious beliefs. Mbiti writes that, ultimately, when their loved ones stop remembering them, a 'living-dead' "enters the state of collective immortality. It has 'lost' its personal name, ... and with it goes also the human personality. It is now an 'it' and no longer a 'he' or 'she'; it is now one of myriads of spirits who have lost their humanness" (Qtd. in Winsbro 134). Thus, Beloved, if she is not actively remembered by Denver and Sethe, enters a liminal space filled with millions of other forgotten spirits. Among these spirits are the "Sixty Million and more" individuals killed by the slave trade in Africa and the Middle Passage alone, to which Morrison dedicates her novel in the epigraph. As the novel progresses, Beloved reveals that she herself has an understanding of the collective trauma she represents, and of the "myriads of spirits who have lost their humanness" (Qtd. in Winsbro 134). For example, when Denver accuses Beloved of choking Sethe, Beloved leaps to her own defense saying "I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it" (119). Here, Beloved alludes to the iron chains of slavery, as if to say 'it wasn't me that choked Sethe, it was what I represent; it wasn't me, your sister, it was the collective memory of slavery which I embody.'

Eventually, the novel shifts perspectives, allowing us to read Beloved's first-person account of the state of "collective immortality" ourselves. "I am Beloved and she is mine," Beloved says,

I would help but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures

I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own

and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too
a hot thing” (248)

Beloved continues, saying “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 too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked (248). She references “men without skin” who occasionally bring them water, people who “fall into the sea which is the color of bread,” and “storms [which] rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men” (250). One reading of this section is that Beloved is describing her experience of death. The woman with the ‘face that is Beloved’s’ is Sethe, the afterlife a dark, cramped purgatory. Another reading of this section suggests that Beloved is not describing death but rather the experience of the Middle Passage. Critics of Morrison’s work have supported both of these theories. Deborah Horvitz, for example, argues that Beloved is recalling the separation of an African girl from her mother, as men came to kidnap and enslave them. Horvitz suggests that the clouds Beloved references are actually clouds of gun smoke, obscuring this young girl’s view from her mother. Winsbro builds on both of these readings, suggesting that,

Submerged in death, Beloved compounds the personal experience of her own separation from and abandonment by Sethe with the collective experience of all the abandoned daughters of the ‘Sixty Million and more’—those who did not survive captivity in Africa or the Middle Passage—to whom Morrison dedicates the novel. (135)

This, I believe, is the most convincing reading. In death, *Beloved* taps into the collective trauma of slavery, thus experiencing the passage to the afterlife as the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade.

As in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison does not merely incorporate the supernatural in *Beloved* to prove its existence; she does not ask her readers to believe in ghosts simply for the sake of believing. Morrison does not even utilize the supernatural purely to make us understand individual and cultural traumas. Rather, through the realm of the supernatural, Morrison challenges the very politics of gender and race that “realistic” narratives so often enforce, healing some of the wounds left by cultural trauma in the first place. Pamela E. Barnett points out, in her essay “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*,” that “the available idiom of rape in American culture has obfuscated the centrality of race...there is no widely recognizable story of white men’s rape of black women, and narratives of homosexual rape are even less recognizable when the victim is black” (420). Barnett refers, of course, to literature and non-fiction that fits beneath the umbrella of realism. Morrison, though, through her use of supernaturalism in *Beloved*, begins to unravel these dominant, realistic narratives of race and gender politics.

This is perhaps most evident in Paul D’s storyline, and in his relationship to Sethe. Barnett points out that *Beloved* “acts as a catalyst for Paul D’s recollection of his past” (420). *Beloved*’s presence forces Paul D to remember his own sexual assault at the hands of white men:

Kneeling in the midst they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none—or all.

“Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here you go.”

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in the head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. (127)

The chapter following this account begins, “She moved him” (Morrison 134). The “she” is Beloved, the “him” Paul D. By beginning this chapter with this statement, Morrison implies Beloved has somehow moved Paul D to remember these memories. Later in this chapter, Beloved corners Paul D in the shed, telling him, “You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name” (137). Paul D resists at first, but is eventually forced to comply, and when he does, the metaphorical tobacco tin in his chest, where he stores all of his repressed memories, bursts open. He does not notice at first. All he is aware of is “that when he reached the inside part he was saying, ‘Red heart. Red heart,’ over and over again” (138). In this arguably non-consensual act of sex between Beloved and Paul D, Morrison challenges multiple stereotypes surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. First, the experience makes Paul D remember his sexual assault at the hands of white men, an often-ignored piece of slavery’s dark history. Second, Beloved is the one forcing Paul D into having sex with her, combating the

stereotype of black men as rapists. Third, Beloved's request that Paul D 'touch her on the inside part' parallels Beloved's collective memory of sexual abuse at the hands of white men; she later tells Sethe that "Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (284). Beloved's description of these men as "ghosts without skin" matches the way a young child might perceive a white man; having only ever been surrounded by black people, it makes sense that a child would think white men were simply missing their skin. However, this is arguably not a memory from Beloved's own short life. Rather, it is a reference to a collective memory of white men sexually abusing black women.

Having subverted notions of race and gender found in much of realistic literature, Morrison's characters can begin to heal. After Beloved is driven away by Paul D, Denver, and their neighbors, Sethe cries to Paul D "She was my best thing," referring to Beloved. In this moment, Paul D realizes "he wants to put his story next to hers" (322). "Sethe, me and you, we got more history than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow...You your best thing, Sethe. You are," Paul D tells her (322). In this moment, Paul D acts as the ultimate counterexample to the stereotype of black men who flee. Paul D wants to stay with Sethe forever, not because she is dependent upon him, but because he wants to. Having processed and remembered personal and collective experiences of trauma through the supernatural presence of Beloved, both Paul D's and Sethe's stories can finally become history: books to be placed on a shelf next to one another's.

Song of Solomon and *Beloved* are books to be placed next to one another on a shelf, too. Only they are to be taken out and read, over and over again. Speaking to the power of Morrison's stories, Heinze writes, "Morrison's fiction is a blend of mimesis and fantasy that

incites its readership into awareness and perhaps action. It provides a way to heal the spiritual wounds of double-consciousness or oppression in any guise within the confines of a harsh reality that daily erodes selfhood” (152). The reality of our day-to-day lives is molded by powerful forces of racism and sexism. The aftershocks of slavery still ripple across the nation, shaping our school systems, our prison systems, and our systems of government. Morrison, through her use of the supernatural in her novels, by no means ignores or even sugarcoats the atrocities that have emerged out of this reality. Rather, the supernatural acts as a gentle but firm hand on the back of our heads, forcing us to look at the past and the present long enough to try to understand.

As we grapple with the brutalities of the past and present alike, Morrison shows us that flight is possible, that ghosts exist in the flesh. She changes the very fabric of a reality that we so desperately want to understand, creating a world in which traditional notions of race, gender, and power disintegrate. The idea of flight as a return home, rather than an escape from home, undermines the stereotype of black men who leave home, abandoning their families. Morrison further undermines gender politics by subverting the gender norms she herself initially presents. Morrison depicts flight as a male power, only to reveal Pilate as a woman who flies at the end of the novel. *Beloved* in her corporeal form represents an absolute reversal of normative power dynamics. She is both an infant and a black woman, both characteristics that would render her helpless in traditionally realistic literature. Yet, through the supernatural she has power over her older brothers, her mother, even Paul D. Thus, through the supernatural, Morrison gives us two characters who act as antitheses to the stereotypes of black men who

run away and black women who stay put: Paul D and Pilate. Paul D stays with Sethe and Denver. Pilate flies.

When we return *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* to their places next to one another on the shelf, perhaps we will better understand the gendered and racial forces that shape our realities. Perhaps we will have more empathy for the inherent traumas these forces create. Perhaps we will even be driven to change the very fabric of this reality, drawing some of Morrison's magic into our day-to-day lives.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Tim. *The Logic of Slavery: Debt, Technology, and Pain in American Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Barnett, Pamela E. "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." *Modern Language Association*, vol. 112, no. 3, 1997, p. 418., doi:10.2307/462950.

Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural trauma: slavery and the formation of African American identity*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Folktales, American Black. *The People Could Fly*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of 'Double-Consciousness': Toni Morrison's Novels*. University of Georgia Press, 1993.

Horvitz, Deborah. "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, edited by Barbara H. Solomon, G.K. Hall, 1998.

Mcdaniel, Lorna. "The flying Africans: extent and strength of the myth in the Americas." *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, vol. 64, no. 1-2, Jan. 1990, pp. 28–40.

Montejo, Esteban, and Miguel Barnet. *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*. Pantheon Books, 1968.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2016.

Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage Books, 2016.

Winsbro, B. C. *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference, and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.