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The Formation of Personal and Communal Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Introduction

Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self valuation and encouraging political resistance in one's community. These modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in a subversive memory – the best of one's past without romantic nostalgia – and guided by a universal love ethic... Beloved can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity.  

What Toni Morrison had strived to achieve when writing her 1987 novel, *Beloved*, was to show the rebirth of black identity through revived agency among downtrodden people. By portraying the struggle for self-affirmation, she most vividly displayed what Cornel West perceives as the especially degraded and oppressed people’s hunger “for identity, meaning, and self-worth.” The author herself is an example of a person who lives according to her own truths and is not afraid to admit it. As one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century, Toni Morrison has exerted a tremendous influence on whole generations of writers by bringing a totally innovative outlook on the role of today's novel – especially a slave narrative. Contradicting a conventional milieu and refusing to be accounted for as a sentimental novel writer, she stands in firm opposition to “dropping a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.” Instead, undertaking the role of a writer, she identifies herself with the one

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whose “job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over [the above] proceedings.”

In 1993, upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Toni Morrison exclaims:

So I’ve just insisted – insisted! – upon being called a black woman novelist, and I decided what that meant, because I have claimed it. I have claimed what I know. As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither.

With these words she reveals that her prevailing wish to acknowledge something that so far has been inaccessible to art can finally become articulated within the space of her novel, Beloved. The idea to base this novel on a dramatic, yet factual story of Margaret Garner is derived from a will to deliver truths that even history fails to convey. Discovering a documentation on Margaret Garner's murdering three of her children back in 1850s, Morrison made an attempt to reconstruct the complex psychological background that forced the woman to kill her own offspring. Andre Levy concedes that trying to recount this story “in writing” is Morrison's greatest challenge “because the institutionalized parameters of guilt and responsibility do not provide the vocabulary to 'tell,' legally or narratively, the anomalies of a slave mother's infanticide” (Grewal 1998: 97). Thus, the last sentence in the book reads, “it was not a story to pass on.”

The meaning behind this ultimate utterance can be deciphered as either an assumption of the inability to sustain the story by “writing it down,” or an indication that it will never “pass away” – be forgotten, or dis-remembered. It should, in other words, remain in the blacks' consciousness as an evidence of the traumatic burden of slavery.

Toni Morrison’s Beloved is hardly an attempt to strengthen and fossilize the distress of past experience, rather, it strives to bring consolation to “the broken heartstrings.” In accordance with Cornel West's earlier observation, the novel devotes its pages to a portrayal of the process of individual and collective battle against the devastating effects of institutionalized slavery – the struggle for self-affirmation which also implies the striving to become “the definer” instead of just being “the defined.” In Beloved, the recurring pattern of “self-love and love of others” constitutes the best remedy for the “whitefolk's jungle.” Elizabeth Kella argues that in “loving anything they choose” the novel’s characters such as Baby Suggs, Paul D and Sethe find

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definition of freedom, which becomes a practical tool to eliminate the suffering caused by repression. Hence, learning to love one another is a basic step to self-valuation, be it individual or communal.

Following Martin Luther King's legendary “dream,” Toni Morrison puts the very idea of equality of human race in question. Still, what can be read between the lines of Beloved, is an unswerving hope that the battle for subjectivity, just like the struggle of Sethe and her black community to re-affirm their status of human beings, will one day turn fruitful. The following analysis is an attempt to portray the various paths that Beloved’s protagonists take while searching for their true identity.

In the first chapter the focus is on the individual aspect of the spiritual quest for self-valuation. Examining Sethe's and Denver's struggle for self-affirmation, the study elaborates firstly on the effects that institutionalized slavery had on its victims' psyche. As for Sethe, the discussion concerns not only the problem of dehumanization triggered by the white oppressors, but also the harm done to Sethe by the black community. Sethe's retreat to 124 Bluestone Road is seen as a consequence of the rejection by that society after the barbarous act of killing her own child. Denver's psychological development towards self-recognition begins with the mother-daughter relationship and Denver's fear for Sethe as well as her fear of the community “outside.”

Undoubtedly, Beloved's role in the formulation of Sethe's and Denver's identity is absolutely central to the novel. The ghost's arrival marks a turning point in the protagonists' lives: Sethe is given a chance to revise her past and reenact it, whereas Denver is challenged to responsibility for her family, which results in her subsequent transformation from being a girl to becoming a woman. The appearance of Beloved, however, is both therapeutic and destructive. The damaging results of her agency thus leave space for the community to present its – unquestionably – crucial role in the empowering of its tormented members.

The second chapter of this study takes a closer look at the communal struggle for self-redefinition. Much attention is given to the rationale behind an individual being conditioned by the community, and to the function of “the ancestor” and the African-American heritage in the discovery of collective originality. Also analyzed here are factors that unite members of a social group, such as the religious ritual conducted by “Baby Suggs, holy.” To contrast the common sources of mutual empowerment, this

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study further emphasizes the threat of losing contact with a spiritual leader and falling into the trap of the whites' degrading definition.

Another aspect under scrutiny is the motif of community agency after it has failed to perform its role in shaping its members self-dignity. The community undergoes a “social change” when dialogue with Denver is resumed. This becomes the decisive moment for the community's final recognition of its function. The blacks as a community are thus given a second chance to support and not to reject. Such change could only be obtained through the revision of the community’s actions and re-discovery of its true communal identity.
Chapter One

The Formation of Individual Identity

Worse than that — far worse — was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw, what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up.

~Toni Morrison, Beloved

Toni Morrison's Beloved can figure as an investigation of the paths that the individual takes to reach self-affirmation. The personal need to re-articulate one's selfhood has its roots in the institution of slavery responsible for the removal of this selfhood in the first place. Therefore, the individual searches for “new” self-recognition, an impulse traced back to the trauma of past experience. Even though the effects of slavery were experienced primarily within the communal boundaries, the white oppression has also affected the individual. Only by affirming personal individuality, is one able to be reborn in the community. It seems that in Toni Morrison's Beloved, it is the two female protagonists, Sethe and her daughter, Denver,
that best represent successfully regained self-value, and recognition in the eyes of the community. 7

Though apparently white racial oppression aimed at devaluing and abusing all black people without exception, it tended to exercise its cruelty primarily on black women. According to Cornel West, the cause of black women's trauma in the novels of Toni Morrison is strongly bound with “the effect of the suppression of Black race, which reinforces the black obsession with the psychic scars, ontological wounds, and existential bruises.” These obsessions are of vital significance for the agency of 'self-making' and 'self-inventing,' which are essential to the “human struggle for mature black selfhood.” Nevertheless, as he puts it, “the search for black space (home), black place (roots), and black face (name)” was hindered despite the abolition of slavery. Thus, quoting James Berger's words, “even in a free state and after slavery, the former owners, under the auspices of law and science, can still regard the African American as object, property, and specimen” (qtd. in Kella 2000: 145, 223). In the reality where the abolition of slavery existed apparently only in theory, it was still viable for the whites to continue the practice of slave-holding.

In Race Matters, Cornel West argues that white supremacy originates primarily in the degradation of black bodies in order to have control over them, which is best done through persuasion that their black bodies are ugly (West 2001: 122). Therefore, using the device of dehumanizing the body, slavery aimed first and foremost at women. Audre Lorde affirms that, when considering institutionalized slavery, it is essential to understand that more central than liberation alone was African American women's maltreatment (Kella 2000: 70). It was easier to enact cruelty upon women for, apart from being black, they were also most vulnerable in the black society because they were females. This fact encouraged white oppressors to abuse them sexually. In her book Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle, Gurleen Grewal theorizes that Toni Morrison's Beloved clearly portrays that there is more to the “equality of oppression” since under slavery women were routinely the “subjects of rape, enforced childbirth, and natal alienation from their children” (Grewal 1998: 100). The fact that they were “mothers,” also enabled, even encouraged, white masters to dehumanize and deprive women on a

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7We are led to assume that in Beloved the female characters do achieve the state of self- and communal affirmation at the end of the story. This fact is affirmative though Beloved's female protagonists seem to be in minority among the portraits of women in other works by Toni Morrison. According to Maria Mardberg, in novels such as Tar Baby and Sula the community does not really provide a sense of wholeness due to historically shared experience. By contrast, these novels present females' self-insufficiency and negative individualism. Even though Sethe isolates herself from the society, she does not reject it. Therefore, Beloved differs from Toni Morrison's other works in that it shows inner growth and affirmation of communal identity (Mardberg 1998: 216, 224).
higher level of degradation than it could be done to slave-men.

Apparently, Toni Morrison found the experience of black mothers who develop a sense of self after slavery worth writing about. Hence, *Beloved* appears to be a proper illustration of it. Based on a true story of Margaret Garner the action of the novel takes place in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio. After escaping from Kentucky plantation the main character, Sethe, attempts to kill her children to prevent them from being re-enslaved. She succeeds in killing only one of her four children, “the crawling-already girl.” This event, in all its brutality, condemns Sethe to being rejected by the society. She then seeks refuge within the walls of her house at 124 Bluestone Road, where she separates herself as well as her daughter, Denver, from the black community. ⁸

Hence, the cruelty of dehumanization that indirectly forced Sethe to commit infanticide can be best illustrated with examples from the novel. There are two crucial moments in Sethe's life when she is submitted to the dehumanizing forces of the white oppressors. The first clearly distinguishable incident in Sethe's story that marks a turning point in her life and drastically changes her perception of the future, takes place early in her life, when she is put on the *animal* side of the list of features according to schoolteacher's education. Sethe over hears the man's lesson, during which he teaches his nephews about the *natural features of a human*, drawing a thick line between a human being and an animal. To supply his students with a more precise exemplification of the difference between the human and animal world, he classifies Sethe as a representative of the *animal* realm. Not until she actually acknowledges that “the feature means something naturally assigned to a thing,” can she understand the humiliating classification. She begins to trust in the words of Baby Suggs that “there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (*Beloved* 1997: 89) seeing no other possibility than to draw a general conclusion about the racism of every single white person ⁹ (Kella 2000: 118). The aspect of dehumanization gains even more meaning when, much later in her life, Sethe is pregnant with Denver. Sethe's milk is then taken from her to feed the schoolteacher's nephews. As it is indicated, feeding white boys with Sethe's *own* milk, is superimposed over feeding her *own* children. Such bestial endeavor deprives

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⁸The concept of exclusion recurring in the novels of black women writers is taken into account by Rita Felski, who names all women “outsiders,” since in her opinion, women's priority is to first search for a symbolic identity – the recovery of a completely new sense of self that will, in consequence, enable them to participate in the social world (Mardberg 1998: 114, 115).

⁹This, however, is arguable for Sethe may not be fair in her estimation of the white people. After all, in her own life she did receive help from them: Amy helped Sethe to give birth to Denver when she escaped from the plantation; Ella, unlike the whole female community, instead of feeling offended by Sethe's isolation, is willing to help when Denver seeks her support; the Bodwins – the abolitionists – allow Baby Suggs to live in their own house.
Sethe of the role of being a mother, and degrades her to the position of a “breeder,” as she is made use of like an *animal* in service of feeding a *human*. The humiliation reaches its peak when Sethe learns that her husband, Halle, is a witness to the situation. Since he cannot protect her, he feels emasculated, and therefore abandons her. Much as Halle's behavior is then rationalized by Sethe, she will nevertheless feel disgust for men. This, in consequence, can be a logical explanation of her inability to form a closer relationship with Paul D. As “the last from the sweet-home men” and the only one who survived, Paul D appears in Sethe's life eighteen years after the event of killing her child and shows readiness to form a relationship with Sethe. In fact, this could give the basis for the substitute of a traditional family, if not for them both, then at least for Denver. Yet, to Sethe's disappointment, Paul D cannot reconcile with the knowledge of Sethe's committing so barbarous an act as murder, and following the white masters' example compares her to an animal when he says: “you have two legs, not four.” This declaration is all the more hurtful and humiliating for Sethe because here Paul D sides with the white oppressors, simply unable to understand the complexity of her actions. Sethe, who has hoped for Paul D's support in her suffering, receives it neither from the black society, nor from Paul D. 10

Hence, to talk about “Sethe's journey” to self-reliance and her reaffirmation in the black society it should be emphasized that it were not only “whitefolks who broke her heartstrings.” As a direct result of enslavement, every slave created his/her identity based on the definition provided by the white people. In consequence, the members of the black community begin to perceive each other according to the whites' definition of the Black race. Therefore, a significant hindrance to Sethe's self-valuation can be attributed to the actions of the black community which, rather than using their own definition, interpreted Sethe's actions through the definition “borrowed” from their oppressors. 11 This is why Sethe's killing of her own child can

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10 According to Katherine B. Payant, through the disability of mutual understanding between Sethe and Paul D, Toni Morrison points to the divisions between black men and women, yet only as a product of white society (Payant 1993: 200). In the study on 'double-consciousness' W.E.B. Du Bois claims, similarly to Morrison, that depriving the black men of true Self, the world lets him see himself only through the revelation of this other world. It is then applicable to Paul D's perception of Sethe through the eyes of the whites, for whom she was an *animal*. Compare (Du Bois 1989: 5) with Cornel West's commentaries on 'double-consciousness' (West 2001: 138).

11 Another reason for the black community to reject Sethe is attributed to “being proud.” In accordance with Katherine B. Payant, apart from Baby Suggs, the black protagonists in *Beloved* are all capable of hurting each other. Such tendency is then attributed by Morrison to “being proud” (Payant 1993: 200). The critic further assigns “the capacity to hurt each other” to people as a natural feature. Yet, in the end, the novel *Beloved* brings consolation, as it is the positive side of the community that wins over. Thus, the peril of losing a member of the black community gives reason to swallow one’s pride and unite forces against common evil. So does the community, rescuing Sethe from the devastating
be analyzed at least in two ways, depending on whether the “black” or “white”
definition is applied. Some critics consider the act barbaric, while others see it as
heroic. Perceiving the murder as an act of barbarism suggests agreeing to be defined by
the slaver, whereas calling it heroism, even if controversial, signifies black self-
definition.

Gurleen Grewal, for example, suggests taking Sethe's deed as a heroic act of
resistance that revealed in itself the whole idea of slavery. The critic justifies her
position through the statement: “If the master could subject the slave children in
bondage to a slow ‘social death,’ the mother could release them through physical
death.” The reader is encouraged by Toni Morrison to see Sethe's killing of the child as
not an anomaly, but rather as a revision of the stereotype of “the mammy figure”
(Grewal 1998: 97, 101). Kristina K. Groover is not afraid to call Sethe's act “a
desperate act of love.” 12 All the more unreasonable then, seems Sethe's exclusion
from the black community. The society that has previously heartily welcomed her as its
rightful member, now ostracizes her from its range. They invite her to join their free
community once she has escaped from slavery, and seeks shelter in the embrace of
Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law. Now she is among “her people.” Still, it is only for a
month that she enjoys the status of a “black sister.” After the unforgivable infanticide,
the people who could best understand her motives because of their common experience,
reject her: “Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of
disapproval and a solitary life” (Beloved 1997: 173). Sethe's exclusion from society is
justified by other critics who, unlike Grewal and Groover, find Sethe's murder unpardonable. 13

After being rejected, Sethe finds a place of desolation within the walls of 124
Bluestone house and succeeds in isolating herself, and Denver, from the community.
Marilyn R. Chandler relates the idea of the house, through which women could “work
out their salvation and define their identities.” Accordingly, Maria Holmgren Troy
determines another interpretation of Sethe's seclusion pointing to the importance of “the
division between inside and outside, private and public” of the house. In the critic's
estimation, Sethe spatially circumscribes life to the house, and as such, is able to see a
way to find her true identity. In addition, Sethe's having locked herself in the house can

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12Kristina K. Groover, The Wilderness Within: American Women Writers and the Spiritual Quest,
13For example, Katherine B. Payant argues that “the murder out of maternal possessiveness means an
unwillingness of mothers to allow their children autonomy to the extremes – mother as a terrifying
power” (Payant 1993: 196).
be perceived as an attempt to revise the past in order to free herself from the burden of her murder. The will to re-enact the traumatic experience can be then taken for a struggle for freedom. 14 This being so, the house stands as a device to recollect and recreate memories as a compulsory step to self-redemption. Hence, asserting freedom for oneself called for the revision of the disgraceful past.

Sethe's subconscious longing for clarification of the past, and simultaneously for forgiveness, brings into being the ghost of her murdered child.

According to West African belief, the dead are not finished with the living because the past (the dead), present (the living), and future (the unborn) are coexistent. Deceased ancestors can and do communicate with their descendants, especially if certain rites of the dead have not been performed. Such a world view posits a fluidity and continuity between the past and present (Grewal 1998: 106).

It takes eighteen years for the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter, Beloved, to come back in flesh and claim the love she has been denied. Beloved appears as a young woman, but behaves like a child. Being slaughtered by her mother she has never been given a chance to mature, thus, her development was arrested at the point when she was a “crawling-already baby.” Consequently, her mentality is comparable to that of a child, and she is selfishly demanding. Her infantile egocentricity reveals itself in the nature of her return, namely, she comes back to claim what was taken from her. To borrow a Freudian term, Beloved’s “return of the repressed” denotes the comeback of the suffering soul to “possess” (Grewal, 1998: 105). Initially, Beloved’s appearance suggests to the main protagonists that she came to “love and be-loved.” As time goes by, Sethe and Denver make every effort to provide the regained family member with all the love they previously reserved for each other. Hard as they try, it becomes visible that the feeling of love is not at all altruistic. On the contrary, the notion of “love” is equalized with the notion of “possession.” Beloved’s behavior is often approached through the lens of Oedipal complex that develops into some demonic force, and subsequently leads to Sethe’s mental and physical destruction. She resigns from her job to be constantly at Beloved’s disposal. In doing so, she gradually loses control over her own life, and progressively ceases to perform the role of a mother. While attempting to

14Marilyn R. Chandler quoted in Maria Holmgren Troy, In the First Person and in the House: The House Chronotope in Four Works by American Women Writers, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1999, pp. 165, 197; hereafter cited in the text as Troy. Troy's further claim is to associate the address 124 Bluestone Road with the American history. 124 stands for the number of years between the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and the publication of Beloved in 1987, and becomes an illustration of bridging the gap between past and present (Troy 1999: 39).
make up for the murder, Sethe does not fulfill Beloved's expectations. For in reality, what Beloved seeks is a compensation for being abandoned in the past. Incapable of perceiving the true intentions behind Beloved’s actions, Sethe exists only as if the ghost’s possession. At this point in the novel, the ghost appears to be a main threat to her mother’s existence. Moreover, the asylum of the haunted house enhances Beloved's drift to “suck the life out of Sethe.”

Katherine B. Payant explains that the maternal bond contains a hidden threat endangering both the child and the mother. Through this bond the child remains infantile and dependent, and it has destructive effects upon the mother, especially when she is viable to lose her children. In Beloved, motherhood is strongly associated with the desire to “possess the children.” This relation is reflected in the extensive use of possessive pronouns that underline the creation of an intimate fusion between females at 124 Bluestone Road. These are three sections in the novel that are Sethe's, Denver's and Beloved's stream-of-consciousness, centered around the possessive pronoun mine. Sethe’s repeated assertion: “Beloved, she mine daughter, She mine,” is followed by Denver’s conviction “Beloved is my sister. Waiting for me. Ready for me to protect her,” and Beloved’s final declaration: “I am Beloved and she is mine. I am not separate from her her face is my own [emphasis mine]” (Beloved 1997: 200, 205, 206, 210). These statements testify that the mother-daughter relationship is not nurturing, and that there is a need to decipher the nature of “love” as “demanding and wanting” from either of the sides. For instance, taking into account Sethe's words: “Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (Beloved 1997: 132), one can argue that at this very point in the novel the feeling of “love” lost its original meaning. That is why “women need to see themselves as more than mothers” in order to prevent themselves from killing their children “in the name of love.” Paul D seems to share this opinion when he states that “the best thing was to love everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back or shoved it in the croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one” (Beloved 1997: 45). Blaming Sethe for her “too thick love,” he emphasizes the fact that her major crime lay not so much in the murder itself as in usurping herself the right to posses her children. According to Carol Boyce Davis, Sethe asserts the “basic law of mother-right over the bodies of her children in the society which denies her that right” (Payant 1993: 196). Yet, within Sethe's words: “Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all,” Toni Morrison defends Sethe's maternal love. She strongly believes

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that this kind of “love” is a sign of the mother's infinite devotion.

Undoubtedly, Toni Morrison's theme of “motherhood” is difficult to decipher. On the one hand, a woman is the creator and caretaker of home. On the other, Morrison's “maternal love” far from being romantic is rather “dark, medicinal and mysterious,” to quote Kristina K. Groover (Groover 1999: 34). Thus, the cause of Denver's reservation to the world outside also has its roots in the rapport between her and her mother. The major aspect of Denver's disability to achieve self-confidence is the lack of established family. To cite Elizabeth Kella, Sethe's family was “neither normative, nor 'pathological' (because) fatherless.” The blame for its deformed structure is on the “traumatizing forces of white racism” (Kella 2000: 116). Hence, the family as a unit stands on guard of racial solidarity, and arises in opposition to racism. In this manner, it threatens the institution of slavery and is, therefore, the main target for destruction. Although Sethe is willing to create a substitute of a traditional home for Denver, especially when her two brothers escape, the source of “domestic nurturance and familial love” does not have its source in her biological mother.  

Undoubtedly, it is Beloved's influence upon Sethe that allows her to re-articulate her value and self-definition. Beloved is not only a ghost of Sethe's killed daughter, but also a symbol of the link between the present and the past. It is therefore not only through the recreation of the maternal bond that Sethe searches for her self-affirmation. The formulation of Sethe's identity is also accomplished through the connection with the past obtained thanks to the ghost. Even though Beloved belongs neither to the present nor to the past, she becomes a link between temporaneity and the times passed. Thus, the factual events from Sethe's and Denver's lives are inseparably connected with their history embodied in Beloved.

Yet, re-memorizing the past can work both ways. In one critic's opinion, Sethe's past could either enslave or free her. It seems that in order to free herself of the burden of the traumatic “yesterday,” Sethe needs to experience it anew. It is not until Beloved's physical arrival that Sethe is finally allowed to “reexamine her story with regard to sacrifice, resistance, and mother love” (Kella 2000: 129). Being a realization of the past trauma, Beloved also becomes “the literal return of the event against the will

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16 Kristina K. Groover also describes Toni Morrison's other protagonists in search for traditional home when conventional definitions fail to be relevant. Not unlike Denver, they all find it “outside” the house, in the arms of their community (Groover 1999: 48, 49).

17 In Beloved Communities, Elizabeth Kella quotes Morrison's opinion on her latest 1998 novel Paradise that is applicable to Beloved as well.: Morrison refers to the creation of a place “to inhabit,” clear of racism, “a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent” (Kella, 2000: 210). Such declaration requires respect for the past with all its cruelty; still, to render it powerless one should try to dis-remember it.
of the one it inhabits” (Grewal 1998: 98). As such, Beloved may act in opposition to the people she settles to live with. A real “memorandum” to the scarcely disremembered history, Beloved re-opens the “wounds” caused by slavery. This confirms the ghost's limiting influence over Sethe and Denver. Carolyn Denard postulates that Toni Morrison's female protagonists understood that their historical background hinders the creation of “their own positive images” (Mardberg 1998: 182). In order to heal the “wounds” of slavery, black people have to learn to forget and leave the harmful experience behind. If Beloved serves as a revival of painful memories that for black people interchangeably meant the times of slavery, then Sethe's and Denver's journey to self-recognition could be impeded by their unwillingness to undergo the torment anew. Beloved should therefore be understood as a symbol of obscure history, the pain of slavery which is constantly being suppressed.

The ghost's negative influence upon the main protagonists of the novel is further visible in the competition between Sethe and Denver over Beloved. When the ghost-girl appears in flesh, Denver becomes jealous, because, like her mother, she also forms a possessive relationship to her sister. While Sethe and Denver render rivals in the battle over Beloved's attention, the atmosphere grows tense. This competitive atmosphere is a result of the mother's and the daughter's nostalgia for lost companionship: it indicates Sethe's desire to revive the broken tie with her daughter and Denver's hunger for a sisterhood. Denver first acknowledges the nature of the relation between Sethe and Beloved: “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her” (Beloved 1997: 251). Witnessing her mother's gradual collapse, Denver decides to prevent her from the destructive influence of Beloved. Even if it is arguable whether Sethe's restoration to the community was this community's or Denver's accomplishment, it is quite clear that without Denver's mature decision, whether rational or intuitive, Sethe's recovery, even her existence, would be highly dubious. The moment of her mother's spiritual death marks the beginning of Denver's quest for maturity. At this particular moment Denver takes on responsibility for her mother and “goes out” to seek help within the community once lost. In fact, Denver's abandoning the house in search for the dialogue with the black community can be read as a positive effect of Beloved's agency.

Although Beloved’s power is devastating, it is also therapeutic. Toni Morrison admits that “the presence or the absence of an ancestor determined the success or the happiness of the character” (Mardberg 1998: 183). It is clear from this explanation that
Beloved stands not only as a symbol of suppression, but also as a key element in the construction of Sethe’s self-recognition. Beloved’s appearance is indispensable for Sethe and Denver, and the process of finding their identity.

In two places in the novel Beloved's restorative power becomes especially evident. The first episode takes place when Sethe, Denver and Beloved go skating on ice together. “Holding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice,...screaming with laughter... Each seemed to be helping the other to stay upright, yet every tumble doubled their delight... Nobody saw them falling” (Beloved 1997: 174). The scene has symbolic reverberations: Beloved brings Sethe and Denver closer to each other, and the mother-daughter tie becomes close-knit. Katherine B. Payant sees the moment in the women's lives as reunion between the mother and the sisters, thus emphasizing the positive aspect of the ghost’s appearance (Payant 1993: 199). Before Beloved's materialization, any attempt of dialogue between Sethe and Denver was hindered, and therefore abandoned. It was a result of Denver's fear for her mother's “murderous love.” But for Beloved, the two women will never have insight into the core of a mother-daughter relation. It is Beloved's remedial force too that reconstructs the mother- and the daughterhood in the novel. 18

Beloved’s healing power is further demonstrated when Denver is forced to “go out the yard.” It is the ghost's agency that provokes Denver's decision to seek help “outside” the secure “four walls.” Denver's mother simply prevents her from communicating with the black society. Maria Mardberg's study strongly supports the view that “communal identities are crucial to the well-being of Morrison's women,” where daughterhood preserves an African-American heritage in the sense of cultural continuity. 19 Through alienation in the house at 124 Bluestone Road, Denver is but bereft of the possibility to aspire to the expectancies imposed on her as a daughter and as a member of the community. Instead, “she grows up self-centered and lonely, afraid of her mother and the world outside the yard” (Payant 1993: 196).

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18 This reunion is partly due to “the locking of the door at 124 Bluestone Road”, as “the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (Beloved 1997: 199). Another controversial interpretation of the retreat into the house and the subsequent formation of the female alliance is investigated by Gurleen Grewal. She argues that this fact is a manifestation of the women’s superiority over men, because emphasis is put on maternal trauma caused by slavery (Grewal 1998: 111-113). This can be compared with Morrison’s view on the unique female sensitivity to the house (Troy 1999: 18), and a more detailed illustration on the hierarchy of gender roles in Elizabeth Kella under the title “Reconstructing the Family” (Kella 2000: 128-137).

As it can be deducted from Denver's endeavor, she learned Baby Suggs' lesson, for she is the one who claimed that, despite the inability to defend oneself against the white folks, one must claim freedom through action.

But you said there was no defense.
“There ain't.”
Then what do I do?
“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (*Beloved* 1997: 244).

Taking this advice, Denver leaves the four walls of 124 Bluestone Road, thus breaking the domestic confinement, and transcending the biological bind that disabled her searching for integrity within the whole community.²⁰

The first person Denver asks for help is Ella. She once turned her back onto Sethe not because of the murder, but because of her deliberate retreat into 124 Bluestone house. Much as she disapproves of Sethe's actions, Denver's first step towards reconciliation with the society deserves a positive consideration. By showing full readiness to earn her living, she has demonstrated signs of mental development. The repentance for which Ella and the society waited so long comes unexpectedly, not from Sethe, however, but from Denver. For the black community of women it is a revelation of Denver's care and sympathy for her mother. After that, not only is Denver given the admittance into the community, but she is also accepted into it as a woman, and not a girl.

Much as it may be ascribed to the ghost’s damaging influence, the challenging decision to leave the secure domestic space is a monumental progress in Denver’s mental growth. The girl’s “stepping off the edge of the world” under the pressure of the evil ghost, puts an end to the infantile stage in Denver’s life. The moment she starts functioning as a member of the society, an adolescent girl transforms herself into a grown-up woman taking whole responsibility for her family’s future. One critic succinctly summarizes this very act as Denver's “rite of passage into womanhood” (Groover 1999: 74). Though it surely constitutes a “journey into community,” it can also be viewed as a voyage into adulthood and self-recognition in the eyes of this particular community. In other words, Denver provides a developmental model of a person who escaped the threat of total alienation and became aware of her place in the social structure.

²⁰On the example of *Beloved*, Elizabeth Kella distinguishes between the separateness of the family roles and the need for solidarity and revision of those roles by means of transcending the biological in order to form unity (*Kella* 2000: 140).
In consequence of Denver's responsible agency, Sethe's recovery is at hand, and it is triggered by the black community. Not only is it achieved by the black women driving Beloved out of 124 Bluestone house, but also by Paul D’s reassurance: “Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles” (*Beloved* 1997: 46). Without doubt, it is Beloved who prompts Sethe’s inward journey. The ghost functions as a purifying “rememory,” and her disappearance signifies the past finally confronted. Now Sethe is “released into the present” (Grewal 1998: 116). The prophetic character of Beloved’s arrival that gives hope to a promising future is reflected at the carnival. Without a vow or promise, to “see how it goes,” Paul D decides to take Sethe and Denver to the carnival. During that very night “they were not holding hands, but their shadows were... she [Sethe] decided that it was a good sign. A life. Could be” (*Beloved* 1997: 47). Sethe's projection of a new “life” to emerge has a double significance. Firstly, it anticipates the ghost's arrival the following day. Secondly, it envisions the emergence of a family from unconventional sources. As it happens the night before Beloved’s materialization into the human body, her appearance can be read as a prophecy of a better tomorrow. For these were the shadows, not people who joined hands: it symbolizes a potential for a family bound to emerge.

Yet, to gain mature self-valuation Sethe needs to claim it *individually*. Beloved's significance is undeniable, but in order to recognize herself as an independent person, Sethe has to believe in it by admitting her “Self” *aloud*. Yet, before spelling out the actual “Me” in the name of self-recognition, she is in danger of losing it forever. Although in the beginning Sethe plays the role of a mother, due to the reversal of roles, she becomes an innocent child as “Beloved ate up her life, grew taller on it” (Groover 1999: 73). It is not until Paul D stimulates her awareness of a true “Self,” and a need for “some kind of tomorrow,” is Sethe finally able to assure her own identity. During one conversation Paul D affirms: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (*Beloved* 1997: 273). Through these words he attempts to awaken Sethe's self-perception, and the need for her detachment from her children. Whereas Sethe continues to regard herself through her children, Paul D strives to build her self-conviction of separateness from them, of her as an independent whole. Sethe’s subsequent reply: “Me? Me?,” though hesitant, is nevertheless a crucial stage of affirming her individual separateness. 21 The development of Sethe's self-value is comparable to Baby Suggs' maturing from the phase of “not knowing what she looked like and not being curious” to the moment of

21By contrast, Carol Boyce Davies finds Sethe’s “Me?” mocking “because no woman receives self at the hands of another, especially a man” (Payant 1993: 199).
“suddenly seeing her [Baby Suggs’] hands and thinking with clarity: ‘These hands belong to me. These my hands’” (Beloved 1997: 141). Sethe grows to the final proclamation of “herself” not in the sense that “her children were her best thing,” but as a reflection of “herself as her best thing.” 22

Toni Morrison’s Beloved demonstrates that the dramatic historical background of slavery may acquire an empowering role. The novel portrays successful development of the “black identity” in times when a black person was denied it. During the struggle for self-definition, Sethe and Denver learn to self-possess their own selves, and overcome the conviction of being someone else's possession. Toni Morrison constructs a story of the personal aspiration of a black individual to be recognized as a human being, which subsequently marks the beginning of the communal crusade to self-acceptance. Only when the individual succeeds in finding his/her own identity does the possibility of gaining the collective self-recognition emerge.

22In addition, Mahdu Dubey, the author of Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic (Bloomington — Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 161; hereafter cited in the text as Dubey), traces the naming of Sethe a “mother,” not only to its literal meaning, but figuratively, to “a mother of black political and cultural resistance.”
Chapter Two

The Development of Communal Identity

The community, the black community ... it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it the 'neighborhood.' And there was this life-giving very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it, within the 'compounds,' within the village, or whatever it is.

Toni Morrison has always placed an individual within the context of the society. Or rather, the society performed a crucial part in the formation of an individual. Morrison insists that the place inhabited by the community was not that essential for its single members as it were for the people that formed it. One has always been surrounded by other members of the community, therefore, the development of the “I” could only be achieved among others. Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved, stands as an example of how isolation from one's community can threaten the well-being of particular individuals. When the novel’s two central protagonists, Sethe and Denver,

lock themselves at 124 Bluestone Road thus starting to live only “inside,” they shed every contact with the “outside.” But for infrequent negotiations with the community, the two women would successfully cease to exist within the four walls. The novel then marks the significance of revising and re-articulating the relationship between an individual and the community.

What exactly constitutes a “community”? According to Raymond Williams, the notion is equivocal. On the one hand, it denotes “actual social group,” on the other, it indicates “a particular quality of a relationship” between the members of a particular social unit. Assigning the latter interpretation a greater salience, he explains that it is the intra-communal relation, rather than the spacial aspect, that decides about the community’s condition and status. As he puts it, “community provides the individual with meaning and purpose, with a sense of belonging to something larger and more powerful than the self.” This constitutes the very essence of what a “community” means. Samira Kawash is even more precise when she says: “a community provides its members with a strong foundation for resisting the oppressions of systemic and institutional prejudice” (Kella 2000: 31, 32). This is very true in the case of institutionalized slavery as it is presented in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

When it comes to slave narratives the aspect of “collective trauma,” and consequently, racial solidarity against common oppression seem vital. Gurleen Grewal asserts that in *Beloved*, an individual is somewhat removed from the center of the novel so as to give priority to the multiplicity of voices. 24 Personal trauma is less important than the interaction and interdependence of various consciousnesses – this way the narrative becomes collective. “Collective” in the meaning of creating mutual remembrance by generating several individuals' dealing with their past. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy makes a genuine observation that in *Beloved* “memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is impersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers” (Grewal 1998: 103, 104). The writer finds a panacea for the dramatic experience by means of “working it through,” as Elizabeth Kella suggests, and developing a sense of unity within the community. Similarly, another critic, David Carr, estimates that the community is in a constant process of composing and recomposing its own history (Kella, 2000: 77). This becomes a call for the revision of

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24 Kristina K. Groover agrees with Gurleen Grewal and several other critics. The word “spiritual” implies, as she notices, not only the change in the novel from the way the individual in the center is replaced by the community. In such a portrayal of a narrative, she sees the shift of the spiritual quest towards female journey into her community (Groover 1999: 54).
the past, and especially, in the case of a slave narrative. When in her narration Toni Morrison speaks “we,” she uses the technique of speaking about, with and for the community. Such “implied ‘we’ ” is also found in Mahdu Dubey's work on Black Aesthetic. Interestingly, Toni Morrison herself presents clues to decipher her writing. About Beloved she says: “the novel should be beautiful and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way... If anything I do... isn't about the village or the community ... it is not about anything” (qtd. in Dubey 1994: 34). This potent declaration proves Morrison's strong will to maintain a dialogue within the black society.\footnote{Toni Morrison also points at the political aspect of her writing; “political” in more than the literal sense: in her view, apart from addressing the black society it should emphasize gender roles. She focuses on sexual politics.} She insists on perceiving her novel not only in terms of aesthetic (the so called “art for art's sake”), but, what is certainly of a greater value for the author, in terms of Black Aesthetic. Morrison invites the contemporary black society to go back to its roots because the black identity is formed in close connection to the historical experience of their predecessors. Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra are convinced that extreme events derived from history, such as persecution or oppression, may provoke collective trauma. Since individuals are always deeply embedded in the social context, this trauma may manifest not only a single experience of one person, but history itself. This is certainly true in Morrison’s Beloved where personal suffering originates in communal repression. It is then worked out, or re-enacted through the intervention of the community (Kella 2000: 26, 27).

A number of critics agree that, in order to build identity, be it individual or communal, there is a need to return to particular moments in the history. Diverse roads to affirming one’s selfhood all converge. The experience of being a slave, the ancestral contribution toward collective identity formation, is the element that Toni Morrison wishes to keep alive in today’s black consciousness.

Maria Mardberg eruditely argues that in Beloved ancestors play a crucial role in the shaping of communal identity:

The figure of the ancestor constitutes a forceful catalyst in the change of consciousness of the granddaughters. Bearing vital cultural memory, the ancestor embodies the spiritual links to the community and provides nourishment for the emotionally starving heroine in that she [the ancestor] communicates transformative knowledge. Her mythic wisdom shapes generational continuity and establishes order in a seemingly chaotic world; she preserves ancestral ties and provides stability (Mardberg 1998: 123).
seriously impeded by slavery. A direct result of being tormented by white oppressors was for a black person to feel an urge to unite with others. This union made it easier to manage the pain and disgrace of being subservient to white masters, when understood and compassioned with by those who shared the same experience. Much as all former slaves did try to erase the brutal past from their memories, they were aware of the necessity to conserve those memories for the next generations. This preservation served not as much as a warning, but rather as the basis of cultural legacy. Ancestors are an important connector to the heritage of the servile African-American history. To Maria Mardberg, the forefathers’ role is essential when it comes to the formulation of their grandsons’ consciousness, which thus ensures “generational continuity.” This way the African-American existence is rendered meaningful and suffused with the significance it deservedly claims. The expression “community-building” seems appropriate when the reference to slaves’ history as “saving history” is made. Satya P. Mohanty confirms that the African-American “experience” provides genuine knowledge (Kella 2000: 225). However, this purely cognitive aspect depends on the subjectivity of an individual, and as such, requires social revision. In view of the above, it seems clear that Sethe's “journey inside” in search of her own identity could not have taken place without the community’s reassessment.

In her study on the notion of community, Elizabeth Kella declares that whether or not community is associated with notions of inclusion or separation its representation lies in “antiquity.” For Morrison ancestry stands for “timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.” She further elucidates: “If we don't keep in touch with the ancestor,... we are, in fact, lost... When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself.” Consequently, return to ancestral ties and values seems fundamental to the protagonists' psychological well-being because they are capable of healing emotions. They also have a potential to transform. Such ties allow an individual to grow in self-confidence in the reality where a black person is constantly reminded of his/her subservience to the white race. Morrison is especially susceptible to the danger of the lack of “conscious historical connection.” A sense of communal identity becomes an anchor in history; the lack thereof signifies disconnection from the nourishing cultural

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26 Further in her study, Elizabeth Kella illustrates other writers’ portrayals of the past, which is then licensed to give inspiration in building collective identity. Whereas for Toni Morrison the past is reflected through the notion of an “ancestor,” for other novelists, such as Alice Walker or Alex Haley, the past connotes “roots,” “myths,” or “a grandmother” (Kella 2000: 49).
heritage. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, it is the grandmother, Baby Suggs, who provides this linkage between the present black society and its historical origins. She becomes an embodiment of ancestry, the catalyst of the cultural and the spiritual for the whole community, and a leading voice that brings the community to its recovery.

Maria Mardberg sees one of the roads to communal identity in the symbolic epitome of “a grandmother.” According to Gretchen Bataille, the grandmother functions as “the storyteller, the preserver of the past and the strength for the future” (Mardberg 1998: 122). In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, “the ancestor,” serves as a spiritual nourishment for the emotionally starved community in that she introduces the transformative aspect into each individual's life.

Mardberg argues that the grandmother's agency manifests itself chiefly in rituals and religion, which at times, brings lost individuals back to the community. In an interview on “Rootedness,” Toni Morrison portrays the African American church as a source of consolation and personal affirmation within the community:

> There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community... You can see [it] sometimes in Black churches were people shout. It is a very personal grief and a statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe (Kella 2000: 226).

Baby Suggs' preaching certainly transcends conventional forms of religion. The Clearing was organized at 124 Bluestone Road, and although Baby Suggs was its head, she would never claim authority or a title of honor, being known modestly as “Baby Suggs, holy.” During her sermons “she told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (*Beloved* 1997: 88). Her religion is “a spiritual resistance were people ask not for God's forgiveness but for God's recognition.” 28 God, then, has to accept black people before He forgives. But if the acceptance meant naming one “a human being,” for Baby Suggs even God perceives people with regard to the color of the skin. For her, the fact of being submitted to whitefolks' definition of the black race remained invariable. 29 She feels she only has power to convince “her people” that the premise of submission “the black” to “the white” is unfair. Her strong objective is to awake the feeling of freedom in every black person. Baby Suggs' endlessly repeated lesson can be summarized by Morrison who asserts that “the recognition validating black personhood can never come

28 Kimberly Rae Connor *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African-American Women* (qtd. in Groover 1999: 72).
29 Vide Chapter One, p. 2, 5.
from 'above' – ...from the white men... – but must be sought and must be forthcoming from the black community” (Kella 2000: 127). The remedy for racial oppression can be traced exclusively to collective affirmation.

Not until Baby Suggs affirms her own freedom, can the very ritual take place. Only when she discovers “her heart knocking in her chest and that it was her own heartbeat,” does she become an authority to talk about freedom. This, in consequence, empowers her to present the model for reconstructing the community and point at the shared roles within its boundaries, where “women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried” (*Beloved* 1997: 88).

Kristina K. Groover claims that Baby Suggs is nevertheless vulnerable in the face of the destructive effects of slavery. In a single moment, in response to the lack of empathy concerning Sethe, she turns back from her society (Groover 1999: 72). This marks the moment of her defeat and surrender. Never again will she address her community, nor revive their belief in a sovereign future.

In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts a community that can embrace its member and be an empowerment in the struggle against white masters. The same community, blinded by jealousy and rage, declare Baby Suggs and Sethe their convicts. Kristina K. Groover theorizes that here “the community fails to perform its role” (Groover 1999: 71). Instead of protecting its members against the devastating forces of slavery, it not only loses faith in its own inner power, but actually imitates the white oppressors in putting a sentence on a black person. The potential to reconstruct Baby Suggs’ and Sethe’s eroded black morale gives way to its destruction.

Although it is the black society that rejected Sethe in response to her infanticide, the actions of this community must be attributed to the devastating agency of whitefolks. The whites' judgment of the black race, undoubtedly, greatly influenced the black people's self-perception. Analyzing Sethe’s story it seems that the black community learns meanness from their masters. Thus, the black society deliberately remains deaf when the white oppressors come to re-enslave Sethe’s family. According to Stamp Paid, one of the members of the black community and a close friend to Baby Suggs, “Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing – like, well, like meanness” (*Beloved* 1997: 157). Enraged about Baby Suggs' giving a welcoming party to her daughter-in-law, Sethe, they cannot stand such wealth and heartiness with which Baby Suggs wants to show her joy.
Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always center of things? ... Giving advice; passing massages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone... it made them mad... It made them furious (*Beloved* 1997: 137).

The thought of Sethe's “full benefit of Baby Suggs bounty and her big old heart” is unbearable. Baby Suggs’ “own people” cannot stand the perspective of a promising future for Sethe under Baby Suggs' roof, possibly because they do not want to be orphaned. It seems then, that the society's greatest sin is in the wrong understanding of Baby Suggs’ actions. They accuse her of material privilege while the only thing she wants is to express joy of the reunited family member.

Elizabeth Kella suggests that the community perceives Baby Suggs' celebration as a threat to communal identity and a violation of exchange economy in making reciprocity impossible. She simply gave too much and therefore “offended them by excess” (Kella 2000: 138). Still, Morrison is quite critical about the community's agency. The sole factor responsible for maintaining unity and wholeness – mutual recognition of one another – when uncompromising, can have the opposite effect. The community's turning back on Sethe and Baby Suggs proves this to be right.

Sethe is expelled from her “black family” because of the murder of her own child. In the eyes of the society this act is unforgivable. The female community especially, rejects Sethe in her motherhood the moment she takes the handsaw into her hands (Payant 1993: 200). Women who share the role of mothers within the community, consider the act of killing one's child an inevitable exclusion from the mothers’ range. Yet, in *Becoming and Bonding*, Katherine B. Payant accounts for Morrison's judgmental standpoint regarding “the dark side of the community.” In her opinion “the community members refuse to recognize their complicity in the death of the baby.” Payant assumes that the same pride that allowed Sethe commit the crime was a reason for the community's passive conduct and prevented them from warning Sethe of the slavers' approaching. Though Sethe physically cuts the throat of her baby-daughter, the responsibility for this murder lies in the community's *deliberate* withholding of any action, any sign announcing the arrival of the white oppressors.

Some critics blame Sethe rather than the community. They disapprove of her needless pride upon deciding to isolate herself from the society. Kristina K. Groover

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30Katherine B. Payant further elaborates on the human capacity to hurt each other as the very motif of community's disgraceful behavior. Controversially, the critic admits that sometimes “this hurt comes from love,” quoting Morrison’s statement on acts committed in the name of love that “violence can be a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do.”
estimates “Sethe's self-isolation unforgivable” (Groover 1999: 70). While all this seems relevant, it is worth mentioning that only by means of ritual can the protagonists in Beloved be spirituality connected to the community. If this community’s function is to prevent an individual from alienation, Baby Suggs' death and the termination of the spiritual Clearings broke the tie between Sethe and her social group, at the same time provoking Sethe's retreat to 124 Bluestone Road.

Therefore, in order to recover and redefine identity, the revision of one's actions has to work both ways. Such decision allows Sethe to preserve her community, and conversely, gives a second chance to the community to protect its member by “performing” its empowering force once more. In Beloved Communities Joseph Roach defines the term performance: “[it] is nevertheless useful to a reading of Beloved because it calls attention to the agency involved in building community as well as to the ritual and transitory character of the community. Performance as 'restored behavior' or 'twice-behaved behavior'... requires repetition, but repetition with a difference” (qtd. in Kella 2000: 148). Although “repetition” indicates a monotonous movement, the stressed “with a difference” marks a new era for the community as a whole. Due to its revision of the once assigned communal role, the recognition of its uniqueness and, therefore, revival of the collective identity is at hand.

Already on the first pages of the novel we encounter Sethe's daughter, Denver. Much too infantile at the beginning of the story, she appears to be childish and self-centered, partly due to being left on her own within the house at 124 Bluestone Road. She is afraid of the surrounding world – the people outside her house, and of her mother who had already murdered her sister to prevent her from being re-enslaved. Under such circumstances, Denver is particularly eager to seek connection with others. And it is her who eventually reunites her family with the black community.

A strong wish to create a traditional relationship similar to that based on maternal love can eventually come true when the ghost-girl, Beloved appears. Having recognized the girl as her dead sister, Denver seizes the chance for a relationship, which evolves into a sisterhood. Typically for a child, Denver thinks egoistically and is jealous of her sister. While Beloved becomes the embodiment of all her wants, Denver attempts to accumulate the materialized ghost's all attention.

Denver, who thought she knew all about silence, was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out. Neither Sethe nor Beloved knew or cared about it one way or another. They were too busy rationing their strength to fight each other. So it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would. The flesh
between her mother’s forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn’t a piece of clothing in the house that didn’t sag on her. Beloved held her head up with the palms of her hands, slept wherever she happened to be, and whined for sweets although she was getting bigger, plumper by the day (Beloved 1997: 239).

Denver’s attitude alters when she becomes aware of the authoritative personality of Beloved. Thus, the ghost’s excessive demands put Sethe's life under threat. In this situation Denver makes a desperate step towards the black community, who in her mentality personifies the unknown “outside-the-house.” Through this act, the roles reverse: a mother becomes a fragile and dependent child, whereas the daughter is altered into the independent decisive woman ready to take risk in the name of love. 31 Not until Denver's mature decision to abandon her family home for the sake of her mother, does the possibility of a dialogue between the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone house and their society emerge. In effect, apart from becoming her mother's mother, Denver undertakes the crucial role of a mediator. Katherine B. Payant identifies this point in the novel as “Denver's growth in strength [while] neighbors turn from their cruelty” (Payant 1993: 197).

What is worth mentioning, is the actual revision of attitudes. Under certain circumstances, particular groups or individuals are constrained to leave secure space of convenience, and re-define their roles. It leads to a “social change,” which in Elizabeth Kella's opinion “signals the interdependence and interpenetration of the individual and society, of the psychological and the political, the private and the public, existence and agency.” Similarly, Amy Binder sees the road to social change in “subjective negotiations of a sense of individual self and identification with a group that aim together at forming collective identity” (Kella 2000: 37). Thus, the affirmation of communal identity necessitates not only communal self re-examination, but more vitally, it requires that each member reconsiders its history through re-memorizing. This in turn, reveals the cyclical character of Beloved, where community is building and re-building itself endlessly in its search for identity. As Elizabeth Kella puts it, this re-organization is triggered by constant reassertion, reiteration and infinite performance. Moreover, without the individual’s participation in this learning process claiming one's freed self would not be possible, which Sethe's example undeniably proves.

Morrison posits 'school' of emancipation to counter the 'school of slavery.'

31Curiously, in Beloved various acts are committed in the name of love. Katherine B. Payant, for example, sees Sethe's barbarous murder as committed “in the name of love,” whereas Denver's decision is made purely “out of love” (Payant 1993: 200).
The lessons of liberation are the lessons of and in a racially homogeneous community characterized by an apparently unconditional inclusiveness. Morrison thus revises the notion of an autonomous self, emphasizing that freedom and selfhood are dependent upon social relations of equality – upon community (Kella 2000: 141).

Inclusion in a larger unit then, is an imperative condition for an individual to become autonomous and self-evident.

Beloved’s story assumes a circular structure. This narrative technique enhances the protagonists’ continuous returns to life episodes, their re-membering and repeating them “with change.” However, Sandra Zagarell perceives this circularity as a classic element of communal narratives. She claims that “they ignore linear development or chronological sequence... Rather than being constructed around conflict and progress [they] are rooted in the process” (Groover 1999: 52). Morrison's story is not embedded in “the linear flight from slavery,” but in “the circular journey to recreate a community destroyed by slavery.” This need for communal re-definition and the negation of traditional sequential character of the novel only accentuates the periodicity of this process. 32

Denver is the one to whom the stimulation of social change should be attributed to, since she is the one responsible for resuming the dialogue with the black community. Still, this already “changed” social group is primarily represented by women. They are first asked for help, and they are the first ones to respond to this plea. Withdrawn from social participation Sethe resigns from the role of utmost importance – being a biological mother. Denver’s “going out” and initiating the dialogue is an indirect search for her mother's substitute. Taking over the role of “community mothers,” black women become the ultimate lifeline, the last chance for salvation. Kristina K. Groover asserts that “whereas the male spiritual quest is traditionally a solitary one, the female characters [here Sethe and Denver] experience spirituality not in solitary flight, but in supportive communities” (Groover 1999: 13, 14). Toni Morrison's choice to place women's community at the center of events highlights the females' indisputable role in the formation of communal unity, and the individual self-realization within its boarders.

In Beloved, the group of women obtains an undeniably crucial function in the process of the individuals' identity formation recovery. Although it is often generalized that the black community brings rescue to Denver and her mother, the colossal role of female union in transforming the future of the main protagonists should not be

underestimated. Not unlike Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison attributes the whole formation and sustenance of community to women as protectors of domestic space, which is essential to the lives of both women and men (Groover 1999: 13, 75).

In Maria Mardberg’s estimation, women are prompted “to go beyond conventional roles and construct new communities on the basis of shared experience” (Mardberg, 1998: 226). Truly enough, *Beloved* tackles racial identification, and interrogates matters within the race. By and large, the “common experience” in *Beloved* is studied with regard to slavery. Gurleen Grewal, however, casts light on the “women servile experience.” Harriet A. Jacobs claims that “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Grewal 1998: 100). The uniqueness of women's anguish derives from the fact of their being mothers. Because of the greater quality of loss in the sense of losing their children, this characteristic adds physical to emotional suffering. Therefore, as Kristina K. Groover puts it, women form an alliance due to their “giving birth and caring for children” (Groover 1999: 54). Maria Mardberg theorizes that through mothering, women are able to take on the function of spiritual leadership in the society (Mardberg 1998: 178). She discusses “community mothers” to emphasize the significance of women's associations bringing comfort to spiritual existence of the younger group members. This aspect is exemplified by the women’s attitude toward Denver. Much as they disapprove of Sethe's behavior, they do not refuse Denver's plea. Moreover, they treat it as their “mother-duty” to stand on guard and provide security for Denver, if not for Sethe, who is now regarded more vulnerable than her daughter.

Interestingly, “being a mother” that unites women to act, is the very aspect that allows them to reject Sethe in the first place. In their mentality, Sethe's infanticide is an action against the law of nature. Killing her own child ostracizes her not only from the black community, but most of all, from the range of mothers. This way Morrison challenges the traditional definition of motherhood. In Barbara Christian's view, Morrison suggests that “motherhood itself is constructed, affected by specific societal/political constructs, even as it is basic to all human societies as we know it” (Kella 2000: 132). All the more understandable seems Sethe's refusal to be defined as “a breeder.” This fact condemned her in the eyes of the female part of the community. Unable to put aside their pride, they refrain from warning Sethe of the masters' approach. At the same time, they withhold the communal embrace, which marks a turning point for both, Sethe and the community. Consequently, Sethe's revision of her
actions is not sufficient to heal the past. To gain the feeling of wholeness there is a need for compassion on the part of the society. Yet, it is not until the community re-examines its actions, that a recognition of collective identity is viable. Elizabeth Kella interprets the women's uprising as “a performance” that figures as a reflection of collective *re-membering*, and in so doing, allows Sethe's reintegration with the community (Kella 2000: 149).

Another strong factor of female agency is illustrated in the way they improvise.

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (*Beloved* 1997: 261).

Kristina K. Groover claims that these were women united by “the power of community” rather than “shared belief or a firm understanding of what they are about to do.” They were the ones accountable for “driving off Beloved at 124 Bluestone Road and restoring Sethe’s family to a place in the community” (Groover 1999: 74, 75). Rejecting the rational approach, they were led by their intuition as they “had no idea what they would do once they got there” (*Beloved* 1997: 257). One thing that determines choosing women over men is rooted in the female perceptiveness superior to men’s logical thinking. When the women reach 124 Bluestone Road “they [stop] praying and [take] a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” 33 (*Beloved* 1997: 259).

Therefore, one can draw the conclusion that collective as well as individual healing is rooted in the female community. Through *re-memory* women can eventually come to understand “the historical circumstances that have limited their own potential” as mothers, which is exemplified by Sethe's dramatic choice to kill her child. “This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw... more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed” (*Beloved* 1997: 164). Despite the community's instability, that was hopefully temporal, women found in their uniting a source of force to keep the community together as one whole. Through *restored* behavior the possibility to re-gain

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33 Here, Toni Morrison goes back to the origins of “the word.” According to the Bible, “the sound” is prior to “the word” – a symbol of logic and mental comprehension. As such, it stands in opposition to the supernatural “sound.” Contrasting human abilities to those escaping conventional cognition, Morrison reveals her unwavering belief in women’s *paranormal* power in the act of Sethe's salvation.
an empowered identity appears achievable. Elizabeth Kella makes a substantial observation that not until Sethe is freed by and into the community of women, can she finally claim freedom to herself (Kella 2000: 150). Sethe's rebirth into the communal bounds is accepted thanks to the community's regeneration. Through re-building a union with Sethe’s family, the black community affirms its true function. Therefore, apart from Sethe's individual recognition and self-assertion as a free person, her salvation should also be regarded as a cornerstone in the process of the affirmation of collective identity.

*Beloved* is a fine illustration of the journey to self-reliance on a communal as well as individual level. Here, the black society is given a chance to play a crucial role in formulating individual identity of the main female protagonists, Sethe and Denver. In fact, the process of self-valuation and affirmation of one's identity is reciprocal. Therefore, much as the communal identity depends on the individual, the self-valuation of a single person owes predominantly to the community's agency. Nevertheless, the reconstruction of self-definition, be it collective or personal, should be defined as a quest for subjectivity. It is a rejection of being the defined, and a claim to be given the right to define. Such transformation constitutes a crucial aspect for the development of the future African-American generations. Thus, the role of an individual, as well as collective struggle for self-affirmation contributes greatly to historical legacy. What forms the very basis of an African-American heritage is the historical burden of slavery and the struggle of black people to gain self-respect.
Conclusions

When Sandra Zagarell writes that “[Narratives of community] take as their subject the life of a community ... and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as entity. The self exists here as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit” (Groover 1999: 52), she proves that an individual’s existence within a greater unit – a community, is vital for the development of collective identity. The critic challenges the conventional novel form where an individual’s self-recognition is dependent upon the abandonment of communal life. Zagarell coins the term “a community novel,” in which an individual is conditioned by the society. This idea is thus reflected in Sethe’s history, in which the black community becomes a stimulus for her future. In Toni Morrison’s Beloved the community succeeds in embracing its members, offering acceptance and safety. In so doing, the black society shapes the personal identity of the two main
female protagonists in the novel. Only through re-vision of the communal actions is the regaining of self-recognition achievable to both Sethe and Denver.

Sethe's and Denver's road to personal identity is grounded in mutual reliance between them and the community. Thus, personal psychological growth is closely related to a group of people. Beloved indisputably proves that the development of a single member's self-confidence is always accompanied, and therefore spiritually supported by others. Although at times the social group turns passive and unsympathetic towards its members (such is the case of Morrison's Sethe), there are common paths that sooner or later lead to unity and mutual understanding.

The present study has portrayed the roads to collective as well as personal recognition. The journey to self-reliance takes the novel's protagonists in many directions. Sethe strives to reconcile with her history through self-examination. The process of her “going as far inside as she needed” to self-identify is gradual. It requires going back to her roots and re-memorizing the horrific past of slavery with its dehumanization and deprivation. Consequently, not only does she have to resist whitefolks' oppression, but she is also subjected to black malice.

Not unlike her mother, Denver also goes through various stages in her development to affirm her personal identity. Devoid a traditional home she sets out on a journey to seek its substitute. Before she is able to change her attitude towards Sethe, she has to overcome the fear of her mother and be willing to rescue her. Yet, it is not until Beloved's appearance when self-recognition for both of them is finally at hand. The ghost of the murdered daughter symbolizes Sethe's past that is ready to be re-visioned, and re-experienced “with change,” which restores her back into the community. Besides, it makes Denver gain mature responsibility for her family and leads indirectly towards her recognition of a place in the society.

As for communal identity formation, in Beloved the common awareness of the tragic experience of slavery is a burden that the black community needs to relieve itself of. Just as on the individual level, gaining collective freedom called for re-memorizing ancestral heritage and uniting through a spiritual quest. The importance of religious rituals presents itself the moment the community ostracizes Sethe. Should Baby Suggs as their spiritual leader still conduct the Clearing, the black society would not have been put to trial to prove solidarity and sympathy towards one of its members. The regeneration of blacks presents the opportunity to repeat actions but “with change.” Beloved is the binding figure, who, apart from being the cause of Sethe's family and community's distress, is simultaneously their salvation.
In Morrison's *Beloved*, a distinguishable predominance is given to the *reciprocal* support between individuals and their society. This mutual understanding, and compassion that stems from common history, contributes to the feeling of wholeness without which the formation of *personal* identity within the *collective* frame would not be achievable. This aspect is the main theme of all neoslave narratives, whose primary function is to re-affirm the distressed black identity. In so doing, they partake in the process of “being heard” in the world, and give evidence of African-American indisputable contribution towards global cultural legacy.
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DuBois, W.E.B.

Grewal, Gurleen

Groover, Kristina K.

Holmgren Troy, Maria

Kella, Elizabeth

Mardberg, Maria

Morrison, Toni

Morrison, Toni
Payant, Katherine B.


Schmidli, Karin


West, Cornel


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