PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DREAMS IN TONI MORRISON’S *BELOVED*: EXPLORING CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES OF TRAUMA CYCLES

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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“Psychoanalysis and Dreams in Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Exploring Continuities and Ruptures of Trauma Cycles,” explores the function of dreams as they relate to trauma and memory. This thesis argues that a character’s engagement with their dreams leads to a healing discontinuity of traumatic cycles, while dreams left untouched likely result in historical and transgenerational cycles and the continuation of personal trauma and its symptoms. This thesis compares the dreams of the characters Beloved and Denver. In part because Morrison notes her influence from both African and Western traditions, this paper argues that a sufficient understanding of dreams in her work requires a multiplicity of approaches. This thesis draws on a plurality of ideas from African and Western perspectives of dreams, the intersections of race and psychoanalysis, and trauma theory. The focus on dreams extends the arguments of critics who analyze trauma in Beloved more generally.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family for their enduring support and understanding throughout my entire life and over the course of my education. I also dedicate this thesis to my classmate and good friend, Timothy Naslund, for his patience and willingness to analyze a problem more than is necessary and for his strict adherence to our ritual of “Thesis Fridays.” Lastly, I would like to thank another friend, who wishes to remain anonymous, for reminding me that ice skates are similar to shoes.
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I. INTRODUCTION

Beloved is Toni Morrison’s 1987 prize-winning novel that imaginatively adds to the story of the historical figure Margaret Garner, fictionalized as Sethe, who was known for escaping slavery but when later found by her former masters, killed her own child rather than allow that child to be subjected to the institution of slavery. In this novel, Morrison critically fabulates, to borrow Saidiya Hartman’s term (“Venus in Two Acts” 11), this historical account by engaging with and imagining a richer backstory for Sethe, noting her history as a slave and her family history and by dramatizing the haunting effects of the trauma of slavery and related traumas through the murdered daughter character, Beloved, who, according to some interpretations, returns to the mother as a ghost and then a more embodied human-like presence, or, at the very least, sparks haunting traumatic memories of the daughter that Sethe killed. The murder, ultimately caused by the evils of slavery, has ramifications for Sethe and Beloved as well as for Sethe’s other daughter Denver and the entire surrounding community.

Morrison emphasizes both the personal experience of trauma and the collective response to trauma in Beloved. The character Beloved herself is often read as representing the collective experience of the African people on the Middle Passage. Further, her simultaneous denial of and obsession with past trauma simulates a common response to trauma both on an individual and collective scale. The community’s desire to forget Beloved after her explosion and disappearance can be said to represent a collective repression of slavery or national amnesia about such events. Denver experiences similar
traumas via inheritance but also exhibits symptoms of trauma as a result of abandonment by family members and from learning that Sethe in fact killed her own daughter. Denver’s transformation from feeling possessed by her traumas to feeling more independent and self-interested has a positive influence on her community; Sethe, in particular, is able to break free of Beloved’s possession over her as a result of Denver’s actions. While historical and cultural trauma are certainly relevant in Beloved, Morrison, in the foreword of the 2004 Vintage Books version of the novel, notes that she was trying “to make the slave experience intimate” (xviii) and to “render enslavement as a personal experience” (xix). Elsewhere, she describes how she was attempting to study the “interior lives” of the enslaved (Morrison, “On Beloved” 282-283). One way Morrison accomplishes this goal is through characters’ dreams, which simultaneously reflect an individual’s psyche as well as intergenerational memories and collective experiences. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the function of dreams as they relate to trauma and memories. Drawing on psychobiological research on dreams and literary discussions of how dreams operate in novels, I examine how dreams function for the characters in Morrison’s novel Beloved.

Specifically, this thesis examines the dreams of Denver and Beloved in the novel. The comparison between these two characters’ dreams reveals two separate paths of potential healing from trauma depending on one’s approach to the dreams. Beloved, who dreams of “exploding, and being swallowed” (Morrison, Beloved 157) refuses to engage with this dream, which results in a repetition of traumatic cycles involving unhealthy mother-daughter relationships and a rupture of the sense of self. Beloved herself also is a dream, as evidenced by her dream-like characteristics and the approaches the community
takes to repress the nightmarish memories she evokes. The community’s refusal to acknowledge the dream of Beloved and the trauma she represents, allows the trauma to linger. Denver, on the other hand, confronts her issues that the “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe” (121) and the later dream “about a running pair of shoes” (303) represent. As a result of engaging with her dreams and thus her traumas, whether these traumas are personal, inherited, or part of a community, she can adequately begin the process of moving on. The way a character becomes aware of and engages with their dreams and what those dreams represent can predict the character’s potential to heal from their traumas. Dreams dealt with can lead to healing and a productive discontinuity of traumatic cycles, while dreams left alone are more likely to result in the continuity of cycles, including historical and transgenerational cycles, and the persistence of personal trauma and its symptoms.

Review of the Literature

Dreams in literature often serve a purpose similar to other literary devices that describe character and setting, but dreams have the unique ability to transcend time and place, including the dramatic present of a novel (Rupprecht 391). Because dreams can convey the intricacies of an individual and a group simultaneously, authors, Morrison included, have the opportunity to express complicated and horrific experiences of particular groups of people, such as the previously enslaved or their descendants in a way not possible in a rigid, linear narrative. This thesis explores how traumas are portrayed and expressed within dreams and through the dreamer’s actions in the novel. These
actions can reveal how character engagement with dreams, and thus with traumas, repressed or outward, can impact the healing process.

Current literature on Morrison’s novels does not connect dreams with trauma, nor are the novels’ dreams themselves explored in depth, especially as they relate to character development. Lay Sion Ng and Ruzbeh Babaee as well as Alan Rice, for example, discuss Beloved’s dream of exploding and being swallowed merely as a starting point for discussing cannibalism in Morrison or in other African literatures (11; 108). Rice justifies the discussion of cannibalism by remarking that while the exploding part of Beloved’s dream has been explored as it relates to the destructive practices of slavery, the being swallowed part of Beloved’s dream has yet to be discussed other than by Christiana Lambidis and Barbara Offutt Mathieson thus far (108) who discuss the cannibalistic or consumptive aspects of Sethe’s mothering. Scholars who mention Denver’s nightmares about Sethe do so in order to discuss mother-daughter relationships or Denver’s path toward subjectivity; the latter of which is relevant to the part of my claim that Denver indeed overcomes some trauma, begins healing and moving on, and gains a sense of self. Few if any scholars mention Denver’s dream about running shoes, which is a more significant indication of her growing subjectivity. Some scholars who do mention the dream use it to claim that it represents Denver’s eternal fate to work as a servant to white people (Schapiro 140; Hollmach 110-111). Current scholarship on dreams in Morrison’s novels explore neither the literary function nor the healing functions of dreams as this
thesis does. An in-depth analysis of characters’ dreams themselves in Morrison’s oeuvre is yet to be completed\(^1\).

Current criticism on trauma in Morrison’s oeuvre include Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2010) and J. Brooks Bouson’s *Quiet as It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000). Schreiber’s reading of *Beloved* as a novel that demonstrates the difficulties of moving on from trauma as well as the interplay of individual and collective trauma lays a useful foundation from which my argument about the cyclical nature of trauma can develop (*Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* 5). Schreiber argues for the reconstruction of the memories of traumatic events rather than an unadulterated confrontation with the reality of such events (59). I agree with Bouson’s notion that Morrison observes the tendency and consequences of avoiding traumatic content (x). Bouson, however, focuses on trauma exclusively as it relates to shame about race. While I rely on these sources for their analysis of *Beloved* as a trauma narrative and

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\(^1\) Morrison frequently includes significant dreams for her characters across several of her novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly dreams that “his penis changed into a long hickory stick, and the hands caressing it were the hands of M’Dear” (139), and the character Soaphead Church calls himself an interpreter of dreams (165). In *Sula*, Plum is “dreaming baby dreams” (71), and Hannah dreams about “a wedding in a red bridal gown” (73). In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman has unpleasant “waking dreams” (126) about his mother, including one when she was enjoying being overtaken by flowers (105). The second chapter of *Tar Baby* details several characters’ dreams including Jadine’s dream about big hats that “shamed and repelled her so” (44), Margaret’s yearning for “the dream she ought to have” (55), Ondine’s dream about drowning (61), and Sydney’s recurring nostalgic dream about Baltimore (61). Later, Alma reveals her prophetic dream about Son. Strikingly, Son also tries “to insert his own dreams into [Jadine]” (119). In *Jazz*, Alice has a vengeful dream about herself murdering another woman by running her over with a horse (86). Morrison also wrote a play called *Dreaming Emmett* (1986) in which Emmett Till is doomed to dream his murder repeatedly, unsettling the notion of linear time of pivotal events in Black history (Williams 2).
their connection of trauma with issues of race, my thesis adds the specific focus of dreams and the significance of dreams and their potential for healing from trauma.

Several trauma theorists discuss the roles of trauma within literature and trauma narratives of literature and their impact on readers. This thesis draws on the works of several trauma theorists including Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). The lived experience of trauma after the specific traumatic event has occurred, however, is marked by belated emotions and reactions and an ongoing mental return to the traumatic moment. The telling of trauma, therefore, cannot be expressed through linear timelines or linear narratives. Instead, questions about trauma “must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 5). This assertion justifies the literary study of trauma.

With regard to Morrison’s Beloved specifically, the circular structure and tellings of traumatic experiences mark it as a trauma narrative. My thesis makes use of Laurie Vickroy’s analysis of Beloved as a trauma narrative, noting Morrison’s intention to convey the events in the novel as testimony of the experiences of African Americans in slavery (173). Essential to my argument that engaging with trauma and dreams and memories of trauma is critical to healing is Felman’s claim that “to seek reality is [. . .] a vital, critical necessity of moving on” (29). Avoiding the aftermath of trauma results in the victim being continuously subjected to ruthless returns to the event or sensations of
being haunted by the trauma itself. By confronting the trauma, however, the victim has an opportunity to rupture the cyclical, endless returns to the moment of crisis.

My approach to trauma in this thesis is also in line with Michelle Balaev’s call for a multiplicity of meanings in trauma studies, particularly with regard to Morrison’s *Beloved*. Balaev argues that the refrain “This is not a story to pass on” toward the end of the novel is purposely ambiguous for this reason (159). Balaev observes that any niche trauma theory, such as intergenerational, transhistorical, and contagion theories of trauma, can be contradictory with another trauma theory or even “conflates the distinctions between personal loss actually experienced by an individual and a historical absence found in one’s ancestral lineage” (152). To reconcile this conflict among theories, however, Balaev emphasizes a trauma theory that privileges geographic place (165).

While physical place can indeed allow sufficient examination of individual trauma as well as collective or historical trauma, Morrison’s concept of rememory, which is essential to understanding the haunting and supernatural aspects of trauma in *Beloved*, transcends conventional notions of time and space. Morrison, through Sethe, describes rememory as a memory that exists not only in people’s minds but also out in the world in physical spaces that anyone can encounter (*Beloved* 43). Madelyn Jablon’s concept of dream memory also informs an emphasis on the collective in addition to the individual in this thesis. The value is that, by virtue of being “located in a more tentative place than memory, dream memories bridge the gap between the collective and the individual because they contain the element of dreams” (Jablonski 142). My thesis engages with multiple temporalities, prioritizes rememory and dream memory over individualized
spaces, and acknowledges trauma and memory that are passed down generations and across migrations. Dreams in particular can reflect any space as well as the dreamer’s present, past, and future simultaneously.

**Race Studies and Morrison on Dreams**

A solely Western approach to studying dreams in Toni Morrison’s novels is insufficient. This thesis does draw on traditional Western psychoanalytic and dream theories but supplements them with a race studies lens to account for African influences in Morrison’s work. Sigmund Freud’s assertion that “dreams have at their command memories which are inaccessible in waking life” (46) is indeed a valuable premise for the study of dreams that connote traumatic and repressed memories, but traditional psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes Western and purportedly universalist conclusions about dreams and what they represent ignores non-Western cultures’ traditions and experiences.

My thesis relies on works by David Eng and Shinhee Han, Anne Cheng, and Badia Sahar Ahad, whose arguments add to and revise Freud’s findings by noting the impacts of race and racism on the psyche. Eng and Han describe the results of narrowly Western and white psychoanalysis as racial melancholia, or histories of racial loss, and racial dissociation, or histories of racial loss across cultures and geographies (1). Cheng notes that psychical negotiations must be taken, perhaps indefinitely, when confronting the lingering effects of systemic racism (ch. 1). Ahad notes a “mutually informative” (3) relationship between African cultural studies and traditional psychoanalysis that must be taken into account in an analysis of characters in *Beloved*. The character Beloved,
particular, exhibits the intersection of diaspora and trauma, as she is said to represent the woman on the Middle Passage in addition to being her own individual character. I lean on Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Hartman for background on how forced migration, especially the migration involved in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, adversely affects both individual and collective psyches and identities.

There is also a significant tradition of dream interpretation in African cultures. Anthony Shafton’s *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams* (2002) offers a comprehensive description of the significance of dreams in African and African American cultures. Shafton’s explicit point that dream study is widely practiced across Africa as part of the psychological healing process (10) is a crucial premise for my argument that Morrison’s characters who engage with their dreams are more likely to progress and work through their trauma. Shafton also discusses dreams as they relate to African spirituality and reverence for ancestors, both of which are also relevant to studying Denver’s and Beloved’s dreams and their significances. Mary Chinkwita’s *The Usefulness of Dreams: An African Perspective* (1993) also describes the religious or ancestral purposes of dreams in African cultures and offers African interpretations of common dreams.

My thesis makes use of Morrison’s non-fiction writing about dreams. Morrison’s personal approach to dreams aids my interpretation of her use of dreams in her novels. She discusses dreams as they relate to the American dream or other aspirations often in *The Source of Self-Regard*. While my thesis instead focuses on dreams that occur during sleep, Morrison offers useful perspectives that apply to many senses of the word dream. She offers a definition of dreaming as “to envision; a series of images of unusual
vividness, clarity, order, and significance” (Morrison, “Sarah Lawrence Commencement Address” 69), and indeed the dreams described in Morrison’s novels have highly specific subject matter and are important to the character dreaming them. Further, Morrison famously declares, “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (“Black Matter(s)” 144), an authoritative assertion which I use to support my focus on dreams in literature as a device for character development. The concept of a dream is central to many of the ways Morrison views the world, which further justifies an investigation of dreams in her novels.

Some of Morrison’s discussions on dreams also justify my argument for using both African and Western perspectives to analyze dreams. In a parenthetical note in her discussion of trees in her novel Sula, she refers to “the dream landscape of Freud” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 188), indicating her awareness of Freud’s positions on dream interpretation. Morrison refers to Milkman’s vision of his mother being engulfed by large red flowers in Song of Solomon as a “waking dream” (192), which evokes African conceptions of dreams in which both sleeping and waking dreams can serve similar purposes (Shafton 91).

Morrison, more than her critics do, likens dreams to trauma and memory. In describing her process of writing The Bluest Eye, she compares the novel’s disconnected structure to “the galaxy accompanying memory” and adds, “I fret the pieces and fragment aspect of memory because too often we want the whole thing. When we wake from a dream we want to remember all of it, although the fragment we are remembering may be—very probably is—the most important piece in the dream” (Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Fiction” 330). Further, Morrison argues that “Narrative is one of the ways
in which knowledge is organized” (“Memory, Creation, and Fiction” 330), which is in line with Caruth’s assertion that for the language of trauma to make sense it must be literary (5).

**Chapter Outline**

This thesis’s first chapter, titled “Beloved as Dreamer and Dream: Diaspora and the Continuity of Trauma,” focuses on the character Beloved exclusively. Beloved concentrates on possessive vengeance over Sethe rather than on confronting her feelings about her past traumas, including the trauma of having been murdered by her mother and the trauma of the Middle Passage, as Beloved represents both individual and collective experience. As a result of not confronting the issues present in her dreams of “exploding, and being swallowed” (Morrison, *Beloved* 157), Beloved must rely on Sethe for life support, which is unsustainable. Ultimately, Beloved’s dream is prophetic, for she does indeed explode at the end of the novel. This chapter also explores Beloved as dream itself. Many of Beloved’s descriptors are variations of the word “dream” or indicate a quality of sleepiness. She thinks of herself as tenuous fragments that are difficult to keep together, and she exists in the liminal spaces between the real and supernatural world. Because Beloved is a dream and also represents the collective experience of slavery, this chapter also explores the cultural and historical significance of the townspeople who “forgot her like a bad dream” (321). Forgetting a dream, which is common in Western cultures that believe dreams to be insignificant, is akin to historical amnesia and results in destructive cycles and the repetition of traumas.
The second chapter, titled “From ‘Unmanageable’ to ‘Running’: Denver’s Dreams and the Disruption of Trauma Cycles,” concentrates on Denver’s two dreams and traces the development of her sense of self through those dreams. This chapter demonstrates how a character’s engagement with their traumatic dream content allows for healing. Denver’s first dream is of “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe” (Morrison, *Beloved* 121). This dream clearly expresses Denver’s fear of her mother Sethe after she learns that Sethe killed Beloved. Rather than confront these issues, however, Denver becomes possessive over Sethe to prevent future killing and isolates herself from the outside world. As a result of this avoidance of trauma, Denver “has no self” (145). Denver eventually does gain subjectivity, however, out of a need for survival.

The night before Denver begins her first day of work in order to provide income for her household, Denver has a “dream about a running pair of shoes” (303). This dream represents Denver’s present fears of abandoning her home and family, her desire and anxieties about her more financially independent future, and a sense reassurance from her generational past, with the shoes recalling her cherished grandmother Baby Suggs’ first paying job as a cobbler. Denver’s confrontation of her traumas and her gained sense of subjectivity result in a rupture of the unhealthy patterns and repeated hauntings plaguing the family. Beloved and Denver indeed have some similarities, being sisters with similar generational backgrounds, but Denver’s confrontation with her trauma is unique to her, as is her significant growth and transformation as a person.

The conclusion offers summative comparison points about the results of Beloved’s and Denver’s respective approaches to their dreams. Because Denver confronts the content of her dreams, she overcomes her trauma, achieves subjectivity, and
begins a process of healing from her traumas. Beloved, on the other hand, by fixating on Sethe for survival rather than confronting her own traumas, replicates toxic traumatic cycles. By not engaging with her dream of exploding, her dream becomes prophetic, as her ultimate fate in the novel is in fact an explosive end. I then emphasize the healing value of studying dreams, especially dreams related to Morrison, as a means of studying trauma, both of which are characterized by fragmented or literary rather than straightforward expressions. To close, I reiterate the necessity of a multifaceted lens in reading Morrison’s literature and discuss the potential for future research on Morrison’s works to be more interdisciplinary.
II. CHAPTER 1: BELOVED AS DREAMER AND DREAM: DIASPORA AND THE CONTINUITY OF TRAUMA

While there are several hypotheses surmising the purpose of dreaming, from the Western suggestion of memory consolidation (Stickgold et al. 1052) to the African theories of dreams as channels to ancestors (Shafton 18) and predictions of the future (34), these theories need not be mutually exclusive. To analyze Beloved herself, who dreams of “exploding, and being swallowed” (Morrison, Beloved 157), all of these possibilities work together to add to a more comprehensive explanation of Beloved’s roles in the novel, her dreams, and the trauma to which her dreams allude. To add to the various readings of the character of Beloved as Sethe’s daughter, as a ghost, and as a human as well as the interpretation of Beloved herself as a symbol of the trauma of forced migration and slavery, I argue that Beloved also functions as a dream had by the community of people affected by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, particularly the community that was aware of Sethe’s actions. Beloved ignores her own dreams and the issues they represent, and the community shuns Beloved while she is present in the novel and attempts to forget her after her presence disappears. These actions represent the repression of trauma, which ultimately does not progress healing and may instead exacerbate the symptoms of trauma. Consequences of such repression include a rupture of identity, both for Beloved as an individual and for the community’s identity as descendants of African cultures and members of African American cultures. Furthermore, while there are systems that contribute to the erasure of traumatic history, there are few if
any formal entities or persons charged with keeping events such as slavery in the community’s memory. Beloved ultimately cannot sustain her life, or the appearance thereof, and the community, as difficult as it is to keep trauma in living memory, risks erasure and historical amnesia of events significant to them.

Existing Readings of the Character Beloved

There is no shortage of various readings of what the character Beloved represents. Perhaps most commonly, as Elizabeth B. House recounts through her comprehensive literature review, Beloved is understood to be a human-like yet still supernatural reincarnation of the baby ghost of Sethe’s first daughter that Paul D exorcises from Sethe and Denver’s house and which understandably acts vengefully toward the household members, particularly Sethe (17).

Understanding Beloved as a supernatural being, a ghost-like presence that haunts the residents of and near 124 Bluestone Road, conveniently supplies readers with the metaphor of understanding Beloved and the traumas associated with her as hauntings. Caruth’s description of trauma even uses the specific word “haunt” (6) to convey the uncontrollable, repeated nature of traumatic memories. Sethe most often conceives of these vivid mental returns to catastrophic events as “rememories,” but when Sethe comes to believe Beloved is in fact the daughter she killed, she is reminded of the traumatic experience of murdering her own child as well as its traumatic context: slavery. Sethe had been attempting to forget about these crises and move on, but they return to her in the various forms of Beloved and the memories Beloved evokes.
House also suggests that Beloved is simply a human woman who has directly suffered the horrors of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery, just as Stamp Paid infers, explaining Beloved’s mysterious smooth skin and abnormal behaviors to be a result of having been locked up her entire life, which also happens to be the same experience that the character Ella had (20).

While House interprets Beloved’s memories of events on a slave ship as her own human memories, albeit perhaps somewhat confused or misremembered memories as a result of trauma (19), others read Beloved’s internal monologue as evidence that she represents not simply an individual, regardless of ghostly or human status, but more significantly as a literary figure representing the collective experience of Africans during the slave trade. Tony M. Vinci specifically says that “Beloved speaks in the voice of a woman brutalized in the Middle Passage; Beloved brings with her the partially affective and experiential histories of those raped and brutalized on the slave ships” (97), which is distinct from House’s suggestion that Beloved is speaking in her own voice about her own experiences.

Other critics not only make a connection similar to that of Vinci, but also address the unsettling nature of diaspora, a phenomenon that both destroys identities and cultures and creates new ones, that is present in Beloved’s character. Avery Gordon asserts that Beloved is “an unnamed African girl lost at sea, not yet become an African-American” and offers the reminder that Morrison dedicates Beloved to the “Sixty Million / and more” (140) victims of slavery in the Americas. The consequences of slavery not only remain in the Americas, but the memories of it also transcend space and continue to affect former colonial powers in Europe as well as areas of Africa. Hartman describes
how the parts of West Africa that were involved in slave trafficking have now profited from visitors traveling to Africa in the attempt to rediscover their heritage, a tourism effort which she calls “a potent means of silencing the past in the very guise of preserving it” (*Lose Your Mother* 164). Furthermore, Ghanaians, for example, still feel unfree because of the long-lasting poverty and immobility rooted in slavery, a history that has yet to be effectively acknowledged and worked through (165). By pointing specifically to the victims of slavery and their descendants in the dedication of the novel, Morrison demands not only a national but also a global revision of the narratives that have been and currently are told about slavery. The character Beloved operates as a memory of the collective experience of being transported on the Middle Passage during slave trade and of subsequent enslavement. Gilroy refers to the history of these events as “the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade” (xi). Similarly, Hall describes the identities of those affected by African diaspora as “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). Beloved reminds characters of these events they want to forget, yet her presence forces a confrontation with the past, thereby generating new ideas about and identities among the community members regarding their relationships with the past. Regardless of slavery’s formal legal end, in fiction or reality, Beloved, as ghost and as memory, demonstrates that the haunting of slavery lives on in the present. Beloved functions to haunt and remind others of a traumatic past; she is the very essence of trauma and traumatic memories, and her presence itself is triggering for the community which then shuns her. Furthermore, Beloved, being Sethe’s daughter, is also afflicted by
these same traumas associated with slavery, yet others cannot see that she, the haunting, is also being haunted, complicating the possibility of her ability to move on.

A lens taking into account diaspora and its effects, as well as other readings of Beloved as human, ghost, Sethe’s daughter, or simply another previously enslaved girl, renders an interpretation that notes Beloved’s liminality. An aggregate of various readings of Beloved highlight this liminality she experiences, and no singular interpretation of Beloved should outweigh or contradict the other, considering the complexity of her character and her other literary functions. Beloved is torn between Africa and the United States, between the real and supernatural worlds, between family connection and isolation, and between being able to express her own identity and not being able to have agency over her identity. Considering Beloved’s liminality between realms and modes of being, I argue in this chapter that Beloved both is a being who has her own dreams, representing past personal and transgenerational traumas, and is a dream, representing the traumas of the community.

**Beloved as Dream**

Beloved not only has memories and is a memory and haunts and is haunted, but she also dreams and is a dreamer. When Beloved first emerges as a human-appearing form, she at first seems to assume the figure of a fully grown young woman, but her behavior and appearance is like that of a newborn infant. Her skin is new, she has no lines on her hands, and her emergence is likened to birth. She appears to come from a nearby body of water, and the mother, Sethe, at that very same moment feels like she has to urinate incessantly, evoking the phenomenon of a woman’s water breaking just before
giving birth. Further, like an infant, she sleeps a lot: “Four days she slept” (Morrison, *Beloved* 64) in fact. There are several descriptors of Beloved’s seemingly constant sleepy state during this chapter where Beloved as young woman first appears: “She gazed at Sethe with sleepy eyes” (62), “this sleepy beauty” (63), and the observation that Beloved would lay “dreamy-eyed for a very long time, saying nothing” (65). Later, Denver, who is Beloved’s sister and who, out of fear that Sethe would murder her or murder again, isolates herself completely from the outside world and only interacts with Sethe and the baby ghost version of Beloved, refers to Beloved as “a dream-come-true” (145), as Beloved is the only being Denver feels comfortably close with. In a sense, Beloved is a dream come true for Sethe as well, who, by believing Beloved is her daughter, can entertain an alternate reality in which she does not kill her daughter, making the birth imagery within the scene of Beloved’s emergence all the more meaningful for Sethe.

Beloved, a tenuous being and stuck in the liminal space between real and supernatural, is not a sustainable being. She has no subjectivity or center, and she must resort to surviving off of the subjectivity of others. In fact, Denver notices that Beloved effectively sucks the life out of Sethe. In the end though, this form of Beloved does not survive—she cannot survive. According to the townspeople in the novel, she explodes, and then she is remembered, or rather not remembered, like a bad dream. An excerpt from the final chapter of *Beloved* demonstrates the community’s acts of remembering and forgetting:

It was not a story to pass on.

They forgot her like a bad dream

[. . .]
Deliberately forgot her.

[. . .]

So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise.

[. . .]

It was not a story to pass on.

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. (Morrison 323-324)

This passage illustrates the connection between dreams and memories, and the act of repression dreamers and rememberers inflict on their negative dreams and memories. In light of Felman’s assertion that healing from trauma requires a confrontation with the realities of the trauma (29), the deliberate repression by these rememberers would only lead to further negative effects. If Beloved represents the experience of slavery, the temptation to simply forget it is understandable, but ignoring the trauma does not allow for an effective moving on. One must engage with the traumatic memories and the dreams that evoke those traumatic memories in order to have any hope of breaking the repetitive patterns of traumatic cycles, as Felman would assert (29). More broadly, historical amnesia, or the repressing or forgetting of a historical event, such as slavery, leads to history repeating itself. Though deliberate remembering does not guarantee that history will not repeat itself, deliberate forgetting more likely ensures historical amnesia and enables a traumatic past to maintain a haunting effect on its people. To forget the dream of Beloved, rather than engage with the trauma that Beloved represents, will only lead to Beloved, or what she represents, periodically reappearing.
Beloved’s Dreams Come True

Beloved, being one who dreams, is guilty of not engaging with her own dreams and the traumas those dreams represent, resulting in her ultimate demise. Even small, forgettable moments—the fragments of life experience—must be acknowledged. Morrison observes the inherent connections among dreams, trauma, and memory by noting their fragmentary nature and the value of those seemingly insignificant elements: “I fret the pieces and fragment aspect of memory because too often we want the whole thing. When we wake from a dream we want to remember all of it, although the fragment we are remembering may be—very probably is—the most important piece in the dream” (“Memory, Creation, and Fiction” 330). History has been broken into pieces, leaving mysterious gaps in the telling of colonialism’s and slavery’s most troubling moments. Caruth notes the difficulty of articulating trauma via linear or empirical means and instead emphasizes the inherent literariness of trauma narrative (5). In the following passage from Beloved, the character Beloved mentions her dreams, which illustrate the tenuousness of her being and the significance of fragmented pieces:

Beloved, inserting a thumb in her mouth along with the forefinger, pulled out a back tooth. There was hardly any blood, but Denver said, “Ooooh, didn’t that hurt you?”

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was
when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces.
She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting. (Morrison, *Beloved* 157)

Other critics have written about these dreams, but often use the dreams merely as a starting point for a discussion on cannibalism or toxic mother love. Morrison famously declares, however, that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (“Black Matter(s)” 144), which, when applied to this passage in *Beloved*, necessitates an analysis of Beloved herself.

I assert that a plurality of perspectives is necessary for analyzing this dream, especially because Beloved herself is such a complex figure. Western dream interpretation, if it gives any regard to dreams in the first place, says that dreams are indicative of one’s fears or desires. This dream does confirm Beloved’s fears and anxieties. She is anxious because she is not a full life form, but the way she deals with this fear is unproductive and results in the toxic behavior of latching on to Sethe for survival, which is unsustainable because eventually Sethe stops giving in to Beloved’s neediness. Sethe does eventually snap out of this unhealthy relationship with Beloved, leaving Beloved with no more life force, and, as a result, Beloved’s dream actually comes true. The community members say Beloved “disappeared […] exploded right before their eyes” (Morrison, *Beloved* 310). This event speaks to the prophetic nature of dreams, which modern Western cultures largely dismiss.

While Western interpretations are useful, critics such as Eng and Han, Cheng, and Ahad note that traditional psychoanalysis reduces the haunting feeling of trauma to
fantasy and the level of the individual and ignores the social forces that can contribute to trauma, including racism. A racially conscious psychoanalysis is necessary for interpreting characters whose traumas and other experiences are heavily influenced by racial issues. Morrison’s familiarity with Freud’s dream interpretations as well as African concepts of dreams further necessitate an ethnic studies approach to dreams and trauma in her novels.

Shafton cites two Afrocentrist psychologists to support his claim that dreams are highly regarded in African and African American communities. One, Maisha Hamilton-Bennet, says “Dreams have a reverence in the African American community, much more so than in the white community. . . . I think a lot of whites have more of a tendency to dismiss their dreams as just some meaningless incoherent nonsense that happened ‘when I was sleeping’ and not connect it with their life. Whereas African Americans will connect it” (5). Here, Hamilton-Bennet further justifies the necessity for more than simply the Western perspective that claims to be universal. Another psychologist Shafton cites, John L. Johnson, connects dreams with trauma and healing when he says “Dreams are used all over Africa as part of the healing process. The statement is, ‘If they don’t dream, I cannot heal them.’ That’s from Zulu culture. And the healer will talk to the person, and then himself have a dream, and then use that dream as part of the work with the person” (10). While Western or white cultures often dismiss the meaning and substantiality of dreams, African cultures revere dreams and engage with dreams as a means of curing psychological ailments. In Beloved’s dreams of exploding and being swallowed, there is a clear psychological ailment that requires attention, but rather than
confessing her dreams or meditating on them, she largely dismisses them and simply looks to Sethe for survival instead, allowing the trauma to fester.

What is also significant in the above passage is the loss of the tooth. Beloved herself does not dream about pulling out her own tooth, but, because Beloved herself is a dream, her experiences are dream-like and can be interpreted as such. Dreams about tooth loss, regardless of whether the teeth in the dreams are actively pulled out or fall out on their own for whatever reason, are one of the most common dreams worldwide (Rozen and Soffer-Dudek 1). A Western, scientific perspective often purports that teeth dreams have somatic or psychosomatic causes, such as grinding one’s teeth during sleep (2) or even simply the feeling of being smothered due to either physical obstruction or psychological ailments including anxiety (6). This more contemporary interpretation coincides with Freud’s findings that when men dream about pulling out their own teeth, the dream often happens around the same time as ejaculation that occurs during sleep (399). Freud expands this observation to assert that dreams about pulling out one’s tooth, for men, represents masturbation or a desire to ease sexual repression, especially during puberty (401). For women, such dreams signify pregnancy and birth (401).

Applying these Western, scientific interpretations to the community’s dream about Beloved’s tooth pulling does yield some useful possibilities for assessing the community’s physical and psychological states. A psychosomatic explanation for the community’s dream in this case most obviously is the feelings of fear, anxiety, and being smothered that come from being enslaved, unfree, and, at best, second-class citizens subject to racial discrimination and violence. While the community Beloved represents is neither solely male or female, Freud’s connection between teeth dreams and new phases
of life, including puberty, pregnancy, and birth, can inform an interpretation about the community’s dream of Beloved pulling out her own tooth. The community in the novel *Beloved* is undergoing significant change, namely the transition from slavery being legal to illegal in the United States, which, historically, resulted in many African Americans having to confront new social roles. Even before the legal end of slavery, many African Americans had escaped slavery by migrating from the South to a Northern state, such as Ohio where *Beloved* takes place. The character Sethe, for instance, represents such a person, and readers witness the significant changes in lifestyle and identity she undergoes throughout the novel because of Morrison’s emphasis on her interior life. Sethe, and likely many other African Americans, real or fictional, feel the sense of being fractured or fragmented that Beloved’s dental dismantling evokes and that Beloved herself also feels and fears.

An African interpretation of dreams must also inform the reading of the community’s dream of Beloved removing her tooth. According to Chinkwita, the African interpretation of dreams about losing teeth predicts the upcoming death of a family member (72). The tenuous integrity of Beloved’s body and identity is established by this point, which already lays the premises for why Beloved’s being ultimately proves unsustainable. In other words, in realistic sense, one could rationally predict Beloved’s death based on these facts alone. If one adopts the idea that dreams are prophetic, interprets Beloved as Sethe’s murdered daughter, and considers Beloved as a relative to members of the community, then the community’s dream about Beloved also predicts Beloved’s death.
Despite the existence of several possible interpretations of the dream of Beloved’s lost tooth, these interpretations do not contradict each other. Rather, considered together they provide a more comprehensive indication of the community’s psyche. A reading that ignores the Western interpretations of dreams, which indeed informs Morrison’s work, overlooks the allusion to the transitional period many African Americans faced in the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, merely a Western perspective overlooks the foreshadowing present in the dream of Beloved’s tooth, thus also disregarding the key message from Morrison that forced migration and enslavement significantly damaged, even doomed, the cultural identity and mental and physical wellbeing of people of the African diaspora. Considering that a dreamer’s engagement with their dreams predicts their potential to heal from trauma, incorporating the African perspective in this case is even more crucial, as the dream of Beloved’s lost tooth directly indicates the rupturing effects of cultural trauma.

Furthermore, the community refuses to engage with the trauma that Beloved and the dream of Beloved represent both during and after her presence in and around Sethe and Denver’s house. While Beloved is present, the community regards her as “sin” (Morrison, Beloved 302) itself or a “devil-child” (308) that must be shunned. Sethe, simultaneously a member and outcast of the community, also does not confront the issues Beloved evokes. As a result of ignoring the dream of Beloved, the trauma Beloved represents fester. For Sethe, ignoring Beloved leads to exhaustion and the growth of Beloved’s body at the expense of Sethe’s (281). For the community as a whole, Beloved does eventually disappear or explode, as some say (310), but she is not truly done away
with despite their efforts to remove her from memory. The last few paragraphs of the novel demonstrate the repetitive nature of traumatic experiences despite repression:

It was not a story to pass on.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who has spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn’t remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn’t said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. They never knew where or why she crouched, or whose was the underwater face she needed like that. Where the memory of the smile under her chin might have been and was not, a latch latched and lichen attached its apple-green bloom to the metal. What made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on?

It was not a story to pass on.

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and
something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if
they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do.

This is not a story to pass on.

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and
go. 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.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints
but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of
the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice
thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

Beloved. (323-324)

These efforts of the community to forget are only superficially successful. Elusive
memories of the trauma of Beloved and what she represents persist. Certain triggers,
from the rustling skirt to footprints by the stream, are intimately familiar and evoke
Beloved’s presence even after her human form finally disappears. The mention of
footprints, particularly footprints that anyone can match, also echo Sethe’s barefoot
escape from slavery and Denver’s dream about running shoes, symbols representing a
common experience of the transition from unfreedom to freedom.

Certainly, forcing a confrontation with past traumas may be unethical and may
even be more difficult than dealing with the lingering effects of unresolved trauma. In
fact, the community’s rationale to avoid the memory of trauma speaks to the inherently painful and unsettling effects of healing. Attempting to forget trauma, however, specifically in the form of ignoring the nightmare of Beloved, does not lead to healing, and, instead, allows the trauma to remain a haunting, troubling presence in the collective psyche.

Another possibility is that Beloved’s fate is not only due to her lack of self-examination but also due to her fragmented sense of self in the first place. She is neither fully human nor solely ghost, neither alive nor completely dead. She is Sethe’s daughter yet also every enslaved woman in her present and past. Occupying these multiple roles dominates her own individual subjectivity. Furthermore, the rupturing effects of diaspora and racism and the subsequent historical amnesia afterward fracture her identity even more. About descendants of those who were enslaved in European colonies and who attempt to garner a stronger sense of identity by returning to the motherland of Africa, Hartman comments, “Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home” (Lose Your Mother 100). Beloved, who feels called to return to Sethe’s world—the world of her mother—despite herself being part of the supernatural world, has no sense of belonging in either realm. Beloved’s life and the life of slavery exist in the past, yet the collective refusal to acknowledge these histories does not procure any closure, resulting in the impossibility of her ability to move on or heal as well as the impossibility of a nation to move on from its past.

This story of Beloved speaks to the necessity of dream study as it relates to the potential to heal from trauma and the larger need for a person, or a community, to engage
with the traumatic past if one is to be free from its incessant hauntings and repeated cycles. More broadly speaking, however, this story critiques the way knowledge is remembered and passed down. Trauma is attempted to be forgotten. The refrain “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, Beloved 323-324) reflects the avoidance of uncomfortable memories, yet in the novel avoidance results in the very continuation of these uncomfortable memories and experiences. Morrison overtly challenges the way history has insufficiently treated the history of slavery both in her novel and in her nonfiction. If such traumatic and fragmented events in history such as slavery are to be remembered, rather than purposely repressed, narrative, which Morrison says is “one of the best ways in which knowledge is organized” (“Memory, Creation, and Fiction” 330) must be more fully recognized for the truths it represents.
III. CHAPTER 2 FROM “UNMANAGEABLE” TO “RUNNING”: DENVER’S DREAMS AND THE DISRUPTION OF TRAUMA CYCLES

Denver’s character arc illustrates the path toward healing and subjectivity after trauma, fear, and dependency. Denver experiences some traumas similar to those of Beloved. Considering that Beloved and Denver are of the same bloodline, many of the inherited traumas afflicting Beloved, such as the disrupting experience of Trans-Atlantic slave trade and racial violence, are the same ones affecting Denver. Denver has evaded certain traumatizing experiences in that she herself was not enslaved, having grown up exclusively in a Northern state where slavery was illegal. For Beloved, ignoring her dreams of exploding and being swallowed indicates her avoidance of confronting her trauma, which ultimately leads to her demise. Denver, on the other hand, confronts her dreams and the issues those dreams represent, leading to a productive disruption of her inherited trauma cycles and a sense of subjectivity and healing.

Traumatic “Monstrous and Unmanageable Dreams” about the Past

Denver’s first dreams in the novel Beloved are “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe” (Morrison, Beloved 121). Some critics note Denver’s initial dreams merely as supporting details to characterize Denver’s character and her relation to her specific traumas. Aida Levy-Hussen, for instance, mentions the dreams in passing while remarking on Denver’s sense of being haunted by her past (“Trauma and the Historical Turn in Black Literary Discourse” 203). Barbara Ann Schapiro and Patrick Bryce Bjork
also only briefly mention these dreams to describe Denver’s obvious fear of Sethe, who had killed Beloved (139; 153). Schreiber frames the dreams as evidence of Denver’s lack of subjectivity, caused directly by Sethe’s act of infanticide (Subversive Voices 129-130). Although I do not dispute these readings, they neglect to analyze Denver’s growth past this point, particularly through a comparison with her later dream of “a running pair of shoes” (Morrison, Beloved 303). Denver’s first set of dreams demonstrates her more immediate response to trauma, a response that indicates the sense of feeling possessed she experiences as well as the weight of intergenerational trauma cycles that have yet to be ruptured. Once Denver has the dream about running shoes, she has begun having realizations about the state of her trauma and has witnessed some of the ramifications that unhandled trauma can have by noticing Sethe and Beloved’s unhealthy relationship.

A focus on Denver’s progression is essential in a practical sense for readers. While the novel Beloved as a whole is a clear trauma narrative (Balaev 157; Vickroy 173), one that explores external and internal causes of trauma as well as its various symptomatic manifestations, many of these trauma focused examinations center Sethe as the protagonist who overcomes her past (Balaev 158) or on Paul D as representative of the effects of the violence and evil of slavery (Bast 1071). Given the disconnect of time periods and direct experiences between Sethe and Paul D and Morrison’s readers, however, “The novel’s closest proxy for the contemporary reader is not Sethe, as prohibitive reading fears, but Denver, the surviving daughter” (Levy-Hussen, “Trauma and the Historical Turn in Black Literary Discourse” 203). Sethe’s and Paul D’s characterizations involve the direct experience of antebellum slavery, which is an
experience that readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States likely do not have.

What some readers may have are inherited memories, postmemories, or inherited traumas related to the events of antebellum slavery, which makes Denver a more relatable character for most readers. Each character represents a different dynamic of the effects of trauma, specifically racial trauma, and, while each character does progress and overcome their challenges to an extent, Denver’s transformation is clearly remarkable in that she gains a significant sense of self when at the beginning of the novel she had none. The contrast between her character when she lacks subjectivity compared to when she later does have subjectivity is evident in the two sets of dreams she has and their surrounding contexts. Denver heals from, or at the very least comes to terms with, her trauma significantly because she actively confronts her trauma. According to Felman, the ability to move on productively from the stultifying effects of trauma indeed requires such intervention on the victim’s part so as to rupture the cyclical, repetitive nature of the memories of traumatic experiences (29). Readers can learn more on healing through Denver’s example than they can through Sethe’s or Paul D’s examples.

Trauma narratives are somewhat didactic in that they encourage readers to reflect on their own psyches. In a psychoanalytic reading of Beloved in particular, Sufyan Al-Dmour asserts that Morrison “is writing a book of remedial – making us look directly at extensive horrors related to slavery in order to have us, the reader, confront it and deal with it, and find solutions for it” (50). Levy-Hussen discusses the use of trauma literature as a “hermeneutic of therapeutic reading,” especially with regard to the desire of African Americans to attend to racialized trauma from the past. Engaging with a work of
literature, such as *Beloved*, leads to “transformative pain” as well as “self-knowledge, authenticity, and psychic healing” (“Introduction” 3). Denver’s evident transformation from dependence to subjectivity via confronting her traumas so as to move through them offers a model for readers to engage with for their own sake.

Denver’s “monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe” (Morrison, *Beloved* 121) obviously indicate nightmarish fears Denver has of Sethe. The dreams begin when her classmate Nelson Lord asks her explicitly, “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (123). Immediately upon hearing this rumor, Denver refuses to return to school. When she finally asks Sethe for verification of this rumor, “she could not hear Sethe’s answer, nor Baby Suggs’ words, nor anything at all thereafter” (121), and this apparent deafness continues for two years up until she hears the baby ghost crawling (122). Later, in the section with Denver’s, Beloved’s, and Sethe’s internal monologues, Denver straightforwardly admits, “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it. […] All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again” (242). Denver also isolates herself, refusing to leave the confines of 124 Bluestone Road (242), for fear of inciting Sethe’s murderous instincts, and avoiding communication with anyone, including Sethe at first (123). These responses to trauma, including the psychosomatic deafness, are not unexpected. In fact, deaf and hard of hearing young adults report higher amounts of childhood physical and emotional trauma than hearing young adults do (Schenkel et al. 1586). Denver’s avoidance of trauma here leads to the effects of the trauma to fester, so her anxiety, isolation, and dependence continue.
The way Denver does approach action in this situation allows Denver to feel as though she is finally moving forward through life, but in reality she is avoiding her sense of self even more. Because Denver’s dreams are “unmanageable” (Morrison, Beloved 121), there is already a sense that Denver is incapable, and perhaps unwilling, to cope with her fears in a productive or healthy way. The full sentence mentioning the dreams is “Meanwhile the monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe found release in the concentration Denver began to fix on the baby ghost” (Morrison 121). Rather than confront the root of Denver’s trauma and fears, Denver removes from her sense of self even more. The baby ghost’s crawling is the first thing Denver can hear after she receives the news about Sethe’s past actions (122). Denver directs all of her own energy toward the ghost: She “kept watch for the baby and withdrew from everything else” (123). Denver may not feel haunted by the ghost directly, but she is possessed by the ghost and possesses the ghost, especially the human form of Beloved, in return: “Beloved was hers” (123). In the monologue section, Denver repeats this idea with the refrain, “She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine” (247). This possessiveness works to compound Denver’s other related fears of abandonment.

Even before the inciting incident of learning about Sethe’s actions, Denver feels alone because of having not known her father Halle, experiencing abandonment via her brothers Buglar and Howard running away from home, and suffering the death of her grandmother Baby Suggs (Morrison, Beloved 14). Repeatedly, Denver expresses possessiveness, rooted in fear of abandonment, directly to Beloved. When Denver first comes to believe Beloved is Sethe’s daughter, Denver pleads to Beloved, “Don’t. You won’t leave us, will you?” (89). Later, when Beloved is playing disappearing tricks in the
basement, Denver repeats the plea: “Don’t. Don’t go back” (145). At this moment, Denver’s complete lack of subjectivity becomes clear, and her fear of abandonment amplifies: “This is worse than when Paul D came to 123 and she cried helplessly into the stove. This is worse. Then it was for herself. Now she is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. [ . . . ] She won’t put up with another leaving” (145). Denver is in fact aware of her diminished sense of self, which manifests itself in her possession of and obsession with Beloved, but she develops an attachment to this mode of being, neglecting her traumatic symptoms and their root causes. As a result, Denver’s unhealthy relationships and low self-regard continue.

Denver’s experiences with trauma seem inevitable additionally because of the likelihood of trauma being passed down generations, despite efforts to prevent such inheritances. Hartman asserts, “Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on” (Lose Your Mother 100). The urge to be close with a mother, whether the term mother applies to a biological mother or a mother country or culture, Hartman argues, is somewhat futile and unwise. One of Sethe’s only memories of Ma’am, her biological mother, is of Ma’am showing her the identifying mark under her breast (Morrison, Beloved 72). In wanting to feel connection with her mother, Sethe expresses desire for a mark too. Ma’am slaps Sethe for her ignorance of not yet understanding that the mark was a product of abuse and torture (73). Shortly after this incident, Ma’am is killed, and Sethe realizes that Nan, the wetnurse who was more present and caring in Sethe’s life, acted more motherly toward Sethe, even though the circumstances of slavery placed Nan in that role. For Sethe, the true mother is inaccessible, yet the mother she is left with is a makeshift mother. As Hartman would put it, the result of any attempt Sethe might make
to overcome slavery and return to a mother would be “to lose your mother, always” (*Lose Your Mother* 100). In an attempt to prevent such lack of belonging for her children, Sethe attempts to prevent horrific acts of slavery on them. She reasons, “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (Morrison, *Beloved* 296). Ironically, however, despite Sethe’s efforts, Denver does in fact suffer from the aftermath of slavery due to both personal inherited traumas and the lingering aftereffects of slavery, as demonstrated by the nightmares of Sethe that shock Denver into reclusiveness.

Denver’s trauma responses seem to be a contagion to Beloved. Beloved also develops a possessive attachment but to Sethe, which in turn seems to negatively affect Denver. In the monologues, Beloved repeats the “she is mine” (Morrison, *Beloved* 248) chant but about Sethe. Beloved also appears to be possessive over Sethe to the point that Beloved makes her feel guilty and never forgives her (285). This emotional abuse is coupled with physical abuse, as Beloved breaks nearby objects the few times Sethe attempts to be assertive and reprimand unacceptable behavior (285). Denver observes the toxicity of this dynamic, noting that “the bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became” (294-295) and how “Beloved ate up [Sethe’s] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” while Sethe “yielded it up without a murmur” (295), becoming emaciated and passive and losing subjectivity. Ironically, witnessing this unhealthy manifestation of traumatic backgrounds provides the catalyst for Denver to overcome her own.
“A Running Pair of Shoes” and a Newfound Subjectivity

Denver’s next significant dream is about “a running pair of shoes” (Morrison, Beloved 303). To help Sethe survive her psychosis and lack of nourishment, which occurs because of Beloved’s ruthlessness to keep Sethe in a state of unending sacrifice in Denver’s view, Denver arrives at the solution of needing to find paying work to provide for the family. She finds work for the Bodwins, the same family who offered paying work as well as the house on Bluestone Road to Baby Suggs. In fact, recalling encouraging conversations with Baby Suggs is the final impetus for Denver’s first steps away from the house to find help (287). While waiting for Mr. Bodwin to pick her up for her first day, Denver recalls the dream she had the night before about the running shoes as well as an overall melancholy tone to the dream. Although some interpretations of this dream argue that it connotes the never-ending second-class status and relentless working conditions of Black Americans, from enslavement to overwork and perpetual poverty, I argue that this dream marks a significant turn in Denver’s healing from trauma and is a sign of her developing subjectivity.

Some critics point to Denver’s running shoes dream as an indication of her continued lack of subjectivity. Schapiro argues that Denver’s compulsion to provide for Sethe and Beloved marks Denver as an Other (140), one who feels the need to relegate herself for the sake of superiors. Rico Hollmach argues that this dream is “a symbol for the eternal servitude and thereby inequality of black people in an oppressive white society—a state of dependence and subservience that the Bodwins ironically and uncritically perpetuate” (110-111). In Hollmach’s view, the Bodwins’ possession of the “At Yo Service” statue signifies their racist attitudes, and these attitudes coupled with the
Bodwins’ seeming kindness in offering Denver paying work contribute to Denver’s overall anxiety (110). Indeed, some of Denver’s hesitation to leave the house is because she remembers Baby Suggs’ warning that there is no entirely defensive move against white people’s wielding of power and control over Black people (Morrison, Beloved 288).

These interpretations by Schapiro and Hollmach, however, also ignore Denver’s homelife situation and state of being around the time the running shoes dream occurs relative to other times in her life. Denver previously had been “ridiculously dependent” (Morrison, Beloved 68) on Sethe for survival and on the baby ghost for companionship, and the results of these actions leave Denver completely isolated from the world outside of 124 Bluestone Road. Complete dependence on a superior and isolation from others are markers of a state of unfreedom, not a state of independence or agency. While basic survival is an impetus for Denver’s decision to take action and break this pattern of passivity, Denver does indeed overcome her fears and self-imposed restrictions. By witnessing the passivity of Sethe and Beloved, especially Sethe, Denver overcomes her own: “since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (286). Even despite Baby Suggs’ warnings about racial injustices, Denver conjures Baby Suggs’ presence, which then tells her to keep the warning in mind but still “go on out the yard. Go on.” (288). This encouragement is the final push for Denver to begin taking matters into her own hands.
Denver first relies on the community, for the only people she knew besides her family and Paul D were Stamp Paid and Lady Jones, her former teacher (Morrison, *Beloved* 286). Soon afterward though, Denver sees that the toxic dynamic between Sethe and Beloved only continues, and Denver decides “Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got to work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either” (297). At this moment, Denver does admit fear, but specifically, “she was afraid to leave Sethe and Beloved alone all day not knowing what calamity either one of them would create” (296). Critics like Schapiro and Hollmach neglect the possibility that Denver’s working for the Bodwins precisely is her act of asserting her freedom, independence, and regard for her sense of self. Morrison’s *Beloved* challenges mainstream notions of freedom to begin with. For instance, Sethe’s desire to be a devoted mother and even kill her own child are assertions of freedom at a time when mothering one’s own biological child was often impossible for enslaved women. In the same manner, Denver’s assertions of freedom may materialize in unexpected ways. The running shoes and the sadness of the dream cannot be restricted to the sole interpretation of Denver’s concerns regarding servitude for white people, as several other factors, including her desire to care for her family and her newfound self-regard also play a significant role.

While Denver is waiting to be picked up for her first day of work, she notes that earlier that day “she woke up crying from a dream about a running pair of shoes” and remarks on the “sadness of the dream [which] she hadn’t been able to shake” (Morrison, *Beloved* 303). Given Denver’s history with her fear of abandonment, she may be afraid of or sad to leave Sethe, even if only temporarily for work each day. At the same time,
leaving Sethe is necessary for the family’s survival and Denver’s own survival, for Denver realizes, “Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got to work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (297). While Denver is already facing the challenge of prioritizing her sense of self, she still empathizes with Sethe because “she knew Sethe’s greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave” (295). Denver knows Sethe also experiences fear of abandonment, so her sad dream about running indicates this anxious concern for others.

The running shoes also recall for Denver a key moment when she, Beloved, and Sethe attempted ice skating. Although ice skates are not traditionally thought of as shoes, they are still comparable in that they are footwear designed and built by a cobbler. Additionally, one does not wear ice skates merely for everyday purposes or for walking, but the wearer of ice skates glides at a speed greater than walking, a brisk speed closer to the pace of running. When Beloved finds a pair of ice skates and inquires about their purpose, Sethe is reminded of Baby Suggs’ advice to “lay it all down” and show love toward her children in any way she wished regardless of others’ opinions (Morrison, Beloved 205).

The ice skates present Sethe with yet another parenting decision in which she has to make a sacrifice, and this time she burdens Denver with the less fortunate position. Sethe can only find one and a half pairs of ice skates and resolves for Beloved, who evidently “never got enough of anything” (Morrison, Beloved 282), to wear the full pair of skates, for Denver to wear one skate, and for herself to slide on her shoes. Denver in this situation can easily empathize with both the skate-wearing Beloved and the shoe-
sliding Sethe, which is representative of her feelings of inner conflict once she notices the unhealthy relationship brewing between Sethe and Beloved later on. Denver understands the situation of each woman. Ultimately though, Denver takes the path of independence. All three of the women are unable to ice skate effectively, in part due to the lack of resources for ice skating and in part due to their lack of experience. The phrase “Nobody saw them falling” (205) is repeated throughout this scene to evoke the dangers of their isolation from the community. Not content with resigning herself to remaining fallen, however, Denver makes the most notable attempt: “Denver stood up and tried for a long, independent glide” (206). Denver’s later dream about running shoes recalls this drive for independence. When Denver has the dream, she is about to begin work for the first time. Just as Denver does not remain fallen like Beloved and Sethe while ice skating, Denver also refuses to remain isolated from the community or functionally immobilized like Beloved and Sethe in the house. Denver clearly shows that she values her independence and subjectivity, even if she has to forgo quality time with her family members because at the very least she prioritizes survival.

While Schapiro and Hollmach assert that the running shoes dream indicates Denver’s doom to continuously work for white people, this interpretation ignores the potential for independence and subjectivity that Denver is creating for herself. Running itself connotes independence and freedom. While Sethe is escaping to freedom, she uses the term “running” to describe why she is traveling. Compared to Sethe’s experience of having to escape without shoes, Denver’s dream of escape with shoes demonstrates generational progress. Denver previously had been a “ridiculously dependent child” (Morrison, Beloved 68) of Sethe’s and emotionally dependent on Beloved. Under
Hartman’s framework, Denver had been attached to a mother that inevitably would fade emotionally (Lose Your Mother 100). Instead, Denver eventually detaches herself from her mother, just as Sethe had detached herself from Ma’am and begun to make her own decisions. Denver’s decision to work to make her own living and support her family who had then become reliant on her for basic needs indicates a step toward independence. The sadness of the dream refers to the sadness of the toxic, helpless household Denver is a part of as well as Denver’s understandable anxiety about working and leaving the house in which she had lived her entire life.

Furthermore, Denver’s fear of abandonment and Sethe’s fear of losing a child are their very cures. Mr. Bodwin coming to pick up Denver for work recalls for Sethe the same image of a white man coming for her children just after she had escaped enslavement, which is the event that incited Sethe to take her older daughter’s life. Seeing another white man come for her child, regardless of the reason, offers Sethe another chance to protect her children and herself. Instead of inflicting loving violence on her child, this time she directly attacks the white man, overtly challenging the cyclical nature of the control and possession white people have inflicted on Black individuals. As a result, this action also is the final catalyst for Beloved’s disappearance or explosion, which frees Sethe and Denver from her haunting possession.

Denver’s change in demeanor after her assertion of independence is undeniable. Although Denver had had a history of resenting Paul D for threatening her comfortable, albeit unhealthy, homelife, Paul D notes how Denver was “the first to smile” and offer a greeting (Morrison, Beloved 313). In a brief discussion about who Beloved was, Paul D begins to offer his opinion, but Denver interrupts him with the reason “I have my own”
Because of Denver’s actions to address her fears and anxieties from the past, which both sets of her dreams indicate, she causes the destruction of the root of those issues and gains a strong sense of self.

An African perspective on dreams helps highlight further positive significance of Denver’s dreams. Chinkwita notes that dreams never tell the dreamer what they already know (37) and that dreams incite the dreamer to take action (41). Both Chinkwita and Shafton emphasize the importance of the reverence of ancestors in African cultures. In particular, Chinkwita cites the phenomenon of ancestors communicating to the living through their dreams, offering guidance and advice for decision-making (62). Chinkwita cites the Kenyan philosopher, John Mbiti, who says that ancestors “hang around in trees” (62), and tree imagery is prevalent throughout Beloved, from the boys of Sweet Home hanging off trees to the scars making the shape of a tree on Sethe’s back to the Clearing in the woods where Baby Suggs offered her sermons. When someone dies, there is even a common funeral custom among people of African descent to say to the spirit of the dead “From now on, we will see you in our dreams” (Songadina Ifatunji qtd. in Shafton 18), indicative of the belief that dreams serve as communication channels between the living and the dead. Additionally, an African sense of spirituality and cosmology is critical to understanding Morrison’s works, as the African understanding of the importance of ancestors permeates both Beloved and other novels like Song of Solomon (Shafton 22).

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2 I acknowledge the existing unique distinctions between African cultures and do not intend to conflate them in this thesis. Chinkwita situates her citation of Mbiti as simply one example amidst a general discussion of various cultures, including the Yoruba culture in Nigeria, that worship or revere ancestors.
3 Similarly to Chinkwita, Shafton also cites several examples of sentiments and philosophies stemming from specific African cultures so as not to generalize African cultures.
Morrison herself notes that people of African descent are “suffering from racial vertigo that can be cured by taking what one needs from one’s ancestors” (qtd. in Zauditu-Selassie 21).

Assuming that dreams serve as communication for ancestors, Denver’s dream about a running pair of shoes is likely indicative of Baby Suggs attempting to send Denver a message, much like how Denver’s imagined conversation with Baby Suggs encouraged her to finally step off the porch of her house (Morrison, *Beloved* 288). Shoes specifically recall the memory of Baby Suggs, who was taught by her husband how to make and repair shoes (168). In fact, working as a cobbler was Baby Suggs’ first paying job as a freed person, which she did for the Bodwins, the same family who hires Denver for her first paying job (171). Considering the African concept of ancestor spirits residing in trees (Chinkwita 62), the “live oak and soughing pine” (205) surrounding the body of water over which Denver, Beloved, and Sethe ice skate gives even more weight to transgenerational presence; the shoes in Denver’s dream recall the spirit of Baby Suggs and her presence in this memory and this dream. This ancestor focused interpretation adds to the reading of Denver’s dream, despite its sadness, as an indication of financial and personal independence.

Regard for the past and ancestry is critical for the healing process. On *Beloved* specifically, K. Zauditu-Selassie asserts that the entire novel is reliant on the regard for ancestors and memory “because it is only when characters regain a sense of the past that they can begin to imagine a future” (145). This claim is akin to Felman’s concept of trauma healing: “to seek reality is [. . .] a vital, critical necessity of moving on” (29). The entire goal of the novel, which is established at the beginning, is to break traumatic and
abusive cycles (Zauditu-Selassie 154). Furthermore, Denver’s actions toward her own self-healing lead to further healing for the community. Denver needed to listen to Baby Suggs’ urging for her to leave the house, and the women planning to destroy Beloved needed to forgive Baby Suggs, which would not have happened had Denver not arranged her new job (Zauditu-Selassie 164).

Denver’s healing is dependent on her being in touch with the past, including her past traumas. Without overcoming her anxieties about abandonment and violence, Denver would not have been able to survive physically nor ensure basic needs for her household.
IV. CONCLUSION

Healing from trauma is an inherently arduous process. During Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home, a journey consisting of its own unique scarring and enervating experiences, including intense debilitating soreness on her feet, Amy Denver, an indentured servant also running toward freedom, tells Sethe while attempting to nurse her feet to health, “Can’t nothing heal without pain, you know” (Morrison, Beloved 92). Indeed, there is an ethics to inciting someone to heal from trauma. An intentional acknowledgement of pain may feel similarly hurtful compared to the unintentional returns signifying traumatic memory. In fact, Amy concedes that “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (42). However, confronting the reality of a traumatic event is necessary for moving on (Felman 29). Although Morrison certainly does not intend to inflict unnecessary pain, Beloved forces readers to reckon with the traumatic experience and memory of slavery with the hope that both individuals and communities will no longer incessantly remain possessed by this event.

The characters Beloved and Denver and their respective approaches toward dreams demonstrate the consequences of avoiding traumatic memories and the potential healing effects of confronting traumatic memories. Beloved ignores her troubling dream, resulting in the continuation of traumatic patterns that result in her own demise and which cause further suffering for Sethe and the community. While Denver at first ignores her nightmares about Sethe, signifying her fear of her mother and her lack of subjectivity, Denver eventually overcomes these issues. Denver finally dreaming about running shoes
represents her simultaneous anxiety about her future as a worker and her newfound confidence and determination to be independent. Beloved must rely entirely on Sethe and Denver for survival, whereas Denver gains a sense of self.

Dreams are also significant to Morrison and woven throughout her works. Besides Beloved, several other novels mention characters’ dreams. Whether a Morrison novel mentions merely one dream in passing, as in The Bluest Eye’s brief line about Cholly’s dream (147), or several substantial dreams of several characters, as in the second chapter of Tar Baby (43-61), the dreams are still indicative of characterization and plot, and can even be connected to trauma and healing in the ways this thesis discusses about Beloved.

Dreams regarding Morrison also directly affect her readers in ways that extend beyond critical analysis. Elizabeth Alexander has a poem titled “The Toni Morrison Dreams.” In a reading of this poem, Alexander explains that “none of this really happened with Ms. Morrison, except of course it all did—in the world of dreams” (“The Toni Morrison Dreams reading by Elizabeth Alexander”). Dreams need not be relegated to the level of fantasy; in fact, Morrison dreams are not only very real but also significant and worthy of study. Alexander’s poem begins with “Toni Morrison despises / conference coffee, so I offer / to fetch her a Starbucks / macchiato grande, with turbinado sugar. / She’s delighted.” (“The Toni Morrison Dreams” lines 1-5). This dream situation interpreted literally may seem odd, but the speaker’s desire to please Morrison represents a compulsion not only to make her happy but also to do justice to her life and her literary and critical contributions.

Future research that aims to both study and honor Morrison must be thorough and comprehensive, rather than limited by solely one approach. Multiple readings and
interpretations build each other rather than exclude or dismiss each other. Research that engages with Morrison through multiple simultaneous approaches would discover additional implications of dreams within and across her texts, including implications regarding trauma and memory studies. An intertextual analysis of Morrison’s oeuvre that incorporates multiple critical approaches, rather than seeming unfocused, would offer a more thorough and accurate reading of Morrison that does justice to the complexities and realities she portrays in her literature.
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