

Theology, Psychology, and Politics: The Holy Trinity in Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

This essay dissects the previously unstudied allusion to the Catholic Holy Trinity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and explains how her purpose in using this allusion, like the Trinity itself, is threefold. Excerpts from the novel reveal how Morrison uses the Trinity to develop her three main characters and their relationships to each other, deepening *Beloved*'s already dense plot. Textual evidence for Morrison's exploration of the reality, fear, and enormity of the enslaved experience is also presented, and how Morrison unites these specific psychologically damaging experiences into a singular commentary on post-Civil War African American consciousness through her trinity of characters is demonstrated. Further, the political climate of the 1980s is investigated and the assertion that Morrison uses her allusion to the Trinity to comment on the tacit reversion of civil rights at the hands of the neglectful Reagan administration and Rehnquist

Court is made. These three interdependent aspects of Morrison's Trinity allusion are also used to illuminate *Beloved's* hauntingly obscure closing message.

Introduction

In her 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison takes up a remarkably diverse set of historical and cultural ideas and quilts them together into an affective narrative. Based on the historic tragedy of Margret Garner's infanticidal response¹ to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, Morrison's story follows Sethe, a mother and escaped slave who murders her young daughter in a fit of mercy, madness, and love when the family's capture and return to the plantation at Sweet Home seems imminent. Sethe and her surviving daughter, Denver, are haunted not only psychologically by the lingering reality of slavery as an institution but physically by the baby's ghost itself. When a strange young woman named Beloved sweeps into their lives, these two haunting realities collide to create a multileveled, unique experience in historical fiction.

The novel follows Sethe, a free woman in post-Civil War Ohio, who fights to suppress the horrific memories of her enslaved life on the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and battles with the guilt of having killed her first-born daughter, whose violent ghost still haunts the family's new home at 124 Bluestone Road. Denver, traumatized by the baby ghost and is a product of the anxious environment her mother's fear has fostered, becomes introspective and friendless, save for her mother and the baby ghost. Both women live in complacent isolation at 124 Bluestone Road until an old friend of Sethe's from Sweet Home, a former slave named Paul D., arrives. Sethe and Paul D. attempt to kindle a romantic relationship, but the baby ghost seethes with anger at the intrusion and Paul D. is forced to exorcise it from the house. He succeeds, but just as a hope for future happiness in familial love emerges for the three characters,

a young woman appears on their doorstep. Sleepy, sickly, soaked with water, and able only to recollect her name, Beloved changes the course of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D.'s lives immediately. The baby ghost incarnate and so much more, she challenges Paul D. and Denver to delve into their respective pasts while ultimately forcing Sethe to confront her own.

Beloved is ornate, dense, and, like all of Toni Morrison's fiction, it is as undeniably beautiful as it is socially and politically conscious. This essay will demonstrate how Morrison, through her allusion to the Catholic Holy Trinity, unites three separate psychological remnants of slavery into one cohesive commentary on African American consciousness, and explore how she uses this Trinitarian understanding to address the revision of civil rights implied by a negligent Reagan administration and Rehnquist Court in the 1980s. The Trinitarian reading of *Beloved*, as an intellectually rewarding complement to studying the novel with the traditional postmodern trinity of race, class, and gender in mind, will also illuminate her evocative closing message that "this is not a story to pass on."²

Acknowledgements to Previous Research

Critical essays that speak to Toni Morrison's use of Christianity, specifically biblical references, in her novels are numerous. Entire volumes of scholarship are dedicated to how these allusions function within Morrison's fiction, and academics continue to study why she chooses to infuse her novels with Christian themes, imagery, and messages so consistently. In dealing exclusively with *Beloved*, however, this scholarship narrows. Morrison draws upon the vastness of the Western literary tradition and the richness of African culture to an extraordinary extent in this novel, and consequently the study of her tendency toward Christian allusions has seemingly fallen by the academic wayside in lieu of *Beloved*'s more politically profitable aesthetics.

Fortunately, several scholars do maintain that this post-modern slave narrative can and should be read with a critical eye for Christian allusions. The most notable research done with *Beloved* in this vein delves into how Morrison reworks scripture throughout the novel, modeling the trials and triumphs of her characters on the teachings and Passion of Jesus Christ. Research suggests that one of the narrative's most pivotal moments incorporates biblical subtexts. The day before Sethe murders her "crawling already?" baby, Baby Suggs accepts two buckets of donated blackberries and intending to only make a couple of pies for her growing family, she inadvertently initiates a feast for the town's entire black community.³ This banquet, created from nearly nothing, is as reminiscent of Jesus feeding the multitude from five loaves and two fish as it is symbolic of the Last Supper, the sumptuous Passover meal Jesus took part in the night before his brutal death.⁴ The community's delight in Baby Suggs' generous feast soon turns to disgust in its frivolous excess, and it is this envious reaction to the meal that sets the mechanism for "crawling already?" baby's death and Sethe's ostracism in motion. The community, resentful of Baby Suggs for hosting the celebration "that put Christmas to shame,"⁵ failed to give a warning cry when a slave catching posse, the "four horsemen"⁶ bearing Sethe's apocalypse, came into town. Biblical subtext can also be inferred from the reverberations of "crawling already?" baby's murder. Sethe acts as Cain did after murdering Abel by refusing to acknowledge the human implications of killing her child, and as a result she is unwilling and unable to properly mourn her child.⁷

Morrison also weaves the Gospel into Sethe's anguished journey to freedom in Ohio. In Morrison's retelling of Jesus' Good Samaritan parable,⁸ Sethe, starving and in labor, collapses in the woods to die when Amy Denver, a white indentured servant making her own bid for freedom, happens upon her. Ignoring race-based societal demarcations, Amy Denver not only

nurses Sethe back to travelling condition but helps deliver the baby, her namesake, as well.⁹ In this same vignette, Amy discovers Sethe's whip-torn back, a weeping wound she likens to a chokecherry tree, and this symbol of debasement hardens into the tree-shaped scar Sethe will bear upon her back for of the sins of slavery¹⁰ just as Christ bore a literal tree upon his back for the collective sins of the world.¹¹

Scholars frequently touch upon Baby Suggs' preaching in their essays as well, searching for Morrison's meaning in the spiritual ministry Sethe's mother-in-law performs, "unchurched",¹² for the newly freed black community in Ohio. Whether or not Morrison's intentions in designating a woman a preacher were iconoclastic,¹³ Baby Suggs' message of a human love untainted by the hatred and scorn of a white slaveholding society and her assertion that "the only grace they could have was the grace that they could imagine"¹⁴ is undeniably Christian.¹⁵ Morrison also references Jesus' public life and his mission as a healer in Baby Suggs; through her ministry, which gives a people who had never owned an object in their life, least of all their selves, the "spiritual space to claim the Self, which is the God-Spirit that links them to their human selves and to one another" she becomes like Christ, a healer of the masses.¹⁶

However, for all of the research into the biblical allusions Morrison includes in *Beloved*, only one brief mention¹⁷ is made of the hermeneutics concerning the powerful ties between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved that drive the novel's plot. Therefore, this essay seeks to fully expose the aesthetics of the Holy Trinity alive in Morrison's *Beloved* and illustrate how even a basic understanding of this theological concept can greatly enhance readers' understanding of Morrison's characters' complex relationships. Moreover, because Morrison declares her authorial sensibility at once "highly political *and* passionately aesthetic,"¹⁸ this essay will also demonstrate how the author uses her allusion to the Holy Trinity to comment on African

American consciousness and subsequently suggest that she uses this commentary to address the political climate of the 1980s, the era in which *Beloved* was written.

Theology, Toni Morrison, and African American Tradition

Denominational conceptions of the Trinity differ, and there are several ways this symbol can be portrayed in fiction depending on which religious doctrine the author identifies with. Perhaps previous research has skirted Morrison's allusion to the Trinity due to the ambiguous nature of this dogmatic principle and the idea that Morrison's legitimate association with a specific strain of religious faith must be established in order to discuss her use of the Holy Trinity in *Beloved*. In a 2004 interview with New York University's Antonio Monda, Morrison explains how her connection to Roman Catholicism started in early childhood. She received a Catholic education, and in these formative years she was "fascinated by the rituals of Catholicism."¹⁹ Therefore, her understanding of the Bible and the Holy Trinity must be as firmly rooted in Catholicism as she once was. Though she left the Church after a crisis of faith in the wake of Vatican II,²⁰ Morrison's thorough comprehension of the complex concept of the Holy Trinity, particularly the Catholic concept of it, is palpable as she taps into this threefold unity to build an equally intricate relationship between her characters Sethe, Denver, and Beloved.

The Catholic Trinity is a literal representation of God in three persons; no subordination of its individual parts is implied, and it is not simply the metaphorical application of a tri-fold symbol. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the three divine Persons are only one God because each of them equally possesses the fullness of the one and indivisible divine nature."²¹ This is the conception of the Holy Trinity that Morrison uses in her novel: she applies the richness of her characters over the framework of these three expressions of God that are all equally, at once, and always one God. A basic understanding of this illogical mystery of faith is

necessary to fully appreciate the way in which Morrison references it, and theologian Fr. Leonard Feeney provides a concise explanation with water as his example: liquid water, mineral ice, and water vapor are all at once water. They are never anything but formula H₂O, and their separate forms are but varied expressions of an identical substance, just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate selves natural to one entity.²² Morrison takes this concept and applies to it Sethe, Denver, and Beloved to it with deliberate dexterity, and through this allusion she creates characters that are innately intertwined.

This is not to say that Morrison takes the Catholic Holy Trinity and inserts it point-blank into her novel with little or no adjustment; her penchant for wedding established literary symbols to African American culture does not allow such a concise explanation. Her simple adoption of the Trinity, in itself, is an ode to the African American tradition. Just as early African American slaves embraced the Christianity offered to them and found room within it to make it their own,²³ Morrison finds room within the Trinity to make this Christian icon hers. When this allusion to tri-fold unity climaxes, near the end of section two, in the chapter²⁴ that begins “I am Beloved and she is mine,” where all three characters’ consciousnesses are completely interwoven, Morrison’s prose takes on such a halting, staccato beat that readers can actually *feel* her reference to African tribal drums:²⁵

Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved

You are mine²⁶

Moreover, her decision to transform the established patrilineal structure of this relationship into an equally potent matrilineal arrangement also signals a direct reference to African culture,²⁷ as Africa has “been home to some of the world’s only matriarchal societies.”²⁸

The Aesthetics of Morrison’s Beloved Trinity

Within this trinity, Sethe, the matriarch, is the Creator; her ownership of the world she made possible for her children by fleeing Sweet Home and escaping to Ohio is unquestioned, particularly when she explains the “miracle” of it to Paul D: “I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that...me using my own head.”²⁹ Furthermore, when she attempts to put her emotions during this exodus into words, Sethe uses phrases that establish her as a source of creation and divine love for her children: “But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between.”³⁰ With Mother as Creator, Morrison then slides Beloved, the reincarnation of Sethe’s sacrificial child, into this feminine trinity as the Daughter.

Sethe forfeits her child, an infant known only as the “crawling already?”³¹ baby, for the salvation of the world she has created for her children; when she sees her master coming through the gate to reclaim her family, his property, she executes her first-born daughter to save them all. “My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is,”³² she confesses, but she did not have to destroy her remaining children because Beloved’s blood sacrifice was all that was needed. In slitting her infant daughter’s throat to save the innocent child from a life of dehumanization, Sethe so horrified the family’s would-be captors that they left her and her surviving children to the authorities, certain that the same “mishandling” that spurred their flight

from Sweet Home had caused them to revert to what their former master termed “the cannibal life they preferred.”³³ Morrison then references another Catholic tradition, the Eucharist,³⁴ to cement Beloved as a Christ figure when Denver “swallowed her [crawling already? baby’s] blood right along with her mother’s milk.”³⁵

Denver, as the Holy Spirit, “proceeds”³⁶ from the Mother and the Daughter, as she is utterly dependent on both to define her. In terms of the Holy Trinity, this article of faith is difficult to define; even the *Catechism* is vague, stating only that “The Father generates the Son; the Son is generated by the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.”³⁷ The two imperative concepts here are that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son equally, and that a double procession is required for the Trinity to function.³⁸ Ironically, in this case the novel actually clarifies the allusion. When Sethe kills the “crawling already?” baby, she generates a baby ghost who, ever present, defines Denver’s existence as much as her flesh and blood mother does. Therefore, Denver progresses, or “proceeds” twice, both hereditarily from Sethe and experientially from Beloved, who is the “crawling already?” baby ghost incarnate.

Sethe and Beloved also hold equal sway over Denver’s heart and mind; Denver explains early on that her two older brothers’ terrified exodus from the possessed house, the death of her revered grandmother Baby Suggs, and the fact that no one in the black community dared set foot on even the porch of their house at 124 Bluestone Road after Sethe deliberately murdered the “crawling already?” baby are insignificant episodes “as long as her mother did not look away,”³⁹ a sentiment that speaks to the power of their relationship in the face of Denver’s adolescent loneliness. Denver’s connection to Beloved is equally intense; unlike her mother, she recognizes her ghostly sister reincarnate in Beloved immediately. Their relationship, born of Denver’s fervent desire to care for Beloved when she arrives on their doorstep nearly incapacitated from

the weight of the living world and amplified by her commitment to protect her if Sethe's murderous tendencies resurface, evolves into something truly spiritual.

An immortal phantom in an earthly body, Beloved is capable of acting beyond her human faculties: she can lift furniture with one hand, insinuate herself into the hearts and minds of the living to incite discomfort or fear, and she can appear from nothing.⁴⁰ Denver, as a human girl, obviously cannot logically behave this way, but when Beloved, in a fit of happiness, dances around the room one afternoon and urges her sister to join her, Morrison grants the ethereal qualities ordinarily reserved for Beloved to Denver, who “grew ice-cold as she rose from the bed. She knew she was twice Beloved's size but she floated up, cold and light as a snowflake.”⁴¹ Levitating from the bed to join her sister in a divine dance, Denver succumbs to a “dizziness, or feeling light and icy at once”⁴² while bouncing round the room and collapses into laughter with her long-lost sister. This melding, the physical dance that allows Denver to momentarily take on Beloved's spectral nature, is accentuated by a conversation they begin that is nothing if not otherworldly—a storytelling session that expressively unites Denver and Beloved to Sethe in one mind.

In the pages that follow, Morrison solidifies her allusion to the Trinity, the deep-seated interconnectivity that defies logic. As Denver begins to recount the story of her birth to Beloved, “the monologue became, in fact, a duet” and the two girls become one, the quilt they are lying on begins “smelling like grass and feeling like hands,” and the quiet room drops out from around them.⁴³ Suddenly, out of a mere *desire* to verbally recreate something “only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it”⁴⁴ they *actually* create it; together as one, they become intermingled with Sethe's consciousness, and readers are privy to the thorough, direct account of Denver's birth as told, impossibly, by two characters who simply could not relate this episode in such

cinematic detail. By flowing naturally from the reality of Denver and Beloved's storytelling into the eight-page, firsthand reality of Sethe's labor and delivery, Morrison fortifies her allusion to the Trinity with the complex relationship these three characters share. Sethe, Denver, and Beloved are at once three separate entities, united intrinsically with each other as one collective mind. When each character's particular, historical symbolism in Morrison's trinity is accounted for, these multileveled experiences coalesce and American slavery emerges as their horrific common denominator. The three are so expertly intertwined that the totality of their interrelationship creates not only excellent fiction, but an insightful psychological statement: though free in body and conscious thought, the African American mind remains unconsciously tied to and irrevocably damaged by the American institution of race-based slavery.

The Threefold Psychology of Slavery

Throughout *Beloved*, all three characters come to represent three distinct vestiges of slavery that plagued the newly freed African American mind. Like the components of the Holy Trinity combined define one God, the reality, the fear, and the enormity of the enslaved experience are distinct in their respective incarnations yet correspond harmoniously as a singular, indivisible presence in post-Civil War African American consciousness. Sethe, as the aforementioned allusion to God the Father, is by her very nature omnipresent, caught in an eternal "now." Though she spends the majority of her freedom working hard to "remember as close to nothing as was safe"⁴⁵ about her life in bondage, she lives in constant fear that the sound of a twig snapping or some other common occurrence will send her into a raw reverie where "suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes."⁴⁶ Though freed legally, Sethe still lives life enslaved by her memory; for her, as for the Creator, past, present, and future meld into eternity and therefore time fails to heal the wounds inflicted upon her at

Sweet Home. Sethe's character becomes Morrison's symbol for the brutal reality of slavery; inundated with painful, repressed memories, she never ceases to perceive enslavement as an imminent threat. As a result, Sethe's drive to protect her family from dehumanization never diminishes. Even in her private musings about her blossoming romantic relationship with Paul D., a happy occurrence that might offer her hope for the future and an escape from the past, she resolutely declares that "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered."⁴⁷

Consequently, Denver, who had never known the pain and trial of slavery directly, is also imprisoned by this same unspeakable past her mother eludes daily. Like the Holy Spirit's function within the Trinity is to evidence the existence of God the Father and Christ the Son,⁴⁸ Denver's character is bound to bear witness to the reality of Sethe and Beloved. She is a product of the environment they create and she must proceed from them. However, Sethe's aversion to talking about the painful memories she is composed of, Beloved's mute presence as the belligerent baby ghost, and the ephemeral nature of the dialogue Beloved is able to maintain as a human leaves Denver at a disadvantage. Knowing not to press her mother for information she is unwilling to share, Denver remains concerned with Sethe's memories only as far back as her own birth and consciously cuts herself off from understanding the obscure and frightening history that silenced her mother.⁴⁹ Unable to gather enough details about Sethe or Beloved to function as she should within the Trinity allusion, Denver stagnates. Powerless even to leave her house, she becomes paralyzed by the "out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again" mindset her mother's fear and Beloved's presence has fostered.⁵⁰ A testament to the only sentiments she knows and tormented by the terrifying residue of slavery that sticks to the periphery of her free-born life,

Denver's character becomes a symbol for abject avoidance of the past and haunting, distilled fear.

Beloved *is* this haunting; she is the embodiment of the enslaved experience.⁵¹ Just as the inconceivable power of God became man in Jesus Christ, the psychologically crippling immensity of slavery becomes human in Beloved. Aside from quite literally haunting the women of 124 Bluestone Road, she gathers in the collective soul of the "Sixty Million and more" to whom this book is dedicated. Through time-bending stream-of-consciousness, Morrison's prose develops a wide range of experiences in Beloved, from the little girl crouching in the hold of a ship on the Middle Passage to the ill-treated little girl serving a lecherous man's food.⁵² These perpetual voices Beloved contains are all enslaved, all aching to be heard, and when Beloved manifests herself as a reality in Sethe and Denver's life, they are all too much to handle. These three consciousnesses —the lingering reality of American slavery, the fearful avoidance of this reality, and the gravity of enslavement as a whole— make up the collective consciousness of the post-Civil War African American community. Morrison's allusion to the Trinity is upheld here, though in a decidedly godless manifestation, as all three mindsets are again equal, inseparable components of the African American experience in the 1870s.

The Hazard of Trinitarian Discord

The perfect balance of these three components is as intrinsic to the well-being of the African American community as the synchronization of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to the composition of God. If Sethe were to reign alone, in terms of her psychological symbolism, the African American community would give under the crushing weight of a life enslaved and face destruction by capitulation. If Denver and her psychology ruled, African Americans would

live in fear of the free world and a listless demise brought on by the inability to succeed in freedom would follow. If Beloved's psychology were allowed supremacy, the immensity of slavery as an institution would overwhelm free life and the African American mind would be dominated and defined by enslavement. No one component of either trinity can be allowed to overpower the others.

Morrison understands this Trinitarian equilibrium, as evidenced by Sethe, Denver, and Beloved's sweet and harmonious relationship at the novel's outset. Upon discovering that Beloved is her "crawling already?" baby come back to life, Sethe sets out to give her all of the childhood experiences, attention, and familial love she could have ever wanted. But Sethe's eagerness to please her daughter soon borders on insanity: preoccupied with placating Beloved, Sethe loses her job and does not seek another.⁵³ Sethe throws herself into her family with newfound, fanatic ferocity. She spends their meager life savings on fancy food and dress and as their stores begin to dwindle, Beloved's demands for attention grow stronger. What begins as a guilt-ridden mother's second chance to prove her love for her daughter turns into an upheaval of the family structure, and Denver observes the gravity of this imbalance with remarkable clarity: "Now it was obvious that her mother could die and leave them both....Whatever was happening, it only worked with three—not two."⁵⁴

Morrison destroys her trinity with imbalance, and the Catholic Trinity would be similarly destroyed if the unique relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were misunderstood. The degradation of Morrison's trinity is marked by Sethe's motion to "cut Denver out completely"⁵⁵ from their fervent mother-daughter bonding and the confusion of both Sethe's and Beloved's roles in the relationship. Beloved adopts Sethe's mannerisms, speech patterns, and dress until "it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who,"⁵⁶ and their roles

completely reverse when commands from Beloved eventually garner only apologies and groveling from Sethe. The damage this division and disparity within the Trinity would do to the Catholic conception of God is unthinkable, as doctrine clearly states the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are as inseparable in their one substance as they are in their purpose: “the Trinity has one operation, sole and the same.”⁵⁷ But the real devastation to Morrison’s trinity occurs when “the mood changed and the arguments began.”⁵⁸ The delicate, mystical tri-fold relationship the three held, which previously allowed them a short-lived respite from a savage past, is upset when Sethe allows a domineering Beloved to relegate her to servitude, and history repeats itself. In terms of the Holy Trinity, this power struggle is inconceivable, but Morrison uses this implication to exaggerate the severity of Sethe’s situation: by distorting the balanced power intrinsic to the three-as-one structure, by obliterating the absolute harmony that *composes* God, God could, in effect, *cease to exist*.

The petrifying past Sethe has held at bay comes barreling down on her, both literally when she becomes a slave to Beloved’s whims and figuratively when Beloved’s aforementioned symbolic meaning is considered. On the literal level, Sethe is relieved that with Beloved she does not need to directly confront her past, as the “crawling already?” baby ghost knows all there is to tell,⁵⁹ but her obsession with and subsequent bowing to Beloved as Morrison’s metaphoric embodiment of the enslaved experience allows Sethe to be swept away into her memories, memories that begin to erode her. Emboldened by her mother’s plight, Denver overcomes the fear instilled in her and sets out for help, but Sethe steadily wanes as Beloved waxes into a pregnant glory, feeding on unspoken misery. Sethe’s physical collapse is imminent until the previously aloof black community, witnessing Denver’s desperation and heeding gossip of the “grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge”⁶⁰ at 124 Bluestone Road, unites to banish

Beloved with prayer.⁶¹ This “amplified trinity” of 30 faithful women⁶² checks Beloved’s power and in doing so, sets Morrison’s trinity aright.

With this drama modeled on the hypothetical collapse of the Holy Trinity, Morrison outlines the repercussions of allowing the searing memories of slavery as a whole to cauterize the budding hope for future happiness in those who survived its terror. Though Morrison wrote this tragedy and trinity of characters with an eye for the past, she also did so with an ear to the present; the closing statement that “this was not a story to pass on,” and her urging to acknowledge history with prudence lest it repeat itself, was as important to the African American community in the late 1980s as it was in the 1870s.

Morrison’s Exorcism of 1980s Politics

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration and the Rehnquist Court are the embodiment of African America’s most deeply rooted anxieties, a new Beloved; they are a powerful, political, and legally potent force for the reversion of civil rights. According to Robert L. Carter, U.S. District Court judge and civil rights advocate, the 1980s marked the most drastic adjustment in America’s approach toward race relations since *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s.⁶³ But contrary to *Brown*, this alteration in attitude was to the detriment of the African American community. The steady thrum of progress that had sustained the Civil Rights movement through desegregation, bussing, and affirmative action was fading; both the federal court system and the American public seemed destined to revert to their pre-Civil Rights racial bias. The “overt manifestations” of racism were gone, but the sentiment remained, evidenced by the persistent *de facto* segregation of cities across the country and combined with a rise in hate crimes among adolescent Americans, racial tension punctuated the decade.⁶⁴ Of New York City in the late

1980s, Carter said, “I feel as vulnerable and exposed to physical danger because of the color of my skin as I felt in rural Mississippi.... or Georgia in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.”⁶⁵

Even as it seemed Civil Rights would meet its end by being systematically dismantled from the bottom up, it was also on the verge of being picked apart from the top down. The conservative Reagan administration did not seem to believe that government intervention was the proper tool for the advancement of minority populations.⁶⁶ This mind-set limited the courts’ role in maintaining the hard-won legal gains that four decades of Civil Rights activism produced, and because most African American scholars, lawyers, and judges considered further racial reform impossible by any means but “through law,” they perceived this lack of government concern as a death-blow to racial equality.⁶⁷ This decade of renewed racial tension and languishing government support for civil rights is the climate that produced *Beloved*, and when Morrison’s trinity of characters and the separate traces of slavery they each symbolize are viewed in light of 1980s politics, her message that “this is not a story to pass on” reverberates with sobering effects.

The heaviness of this statement is evidenced by Morrison’s trinity and the way in which her characters’ respective symbolic implications for African American identity, their types, remain the same in the 1980s despite years of litigation. As in the 1870s, Sethe is still a newly freed woman. She fights to forget hardships of growing up black in America, but having been raised within the humiliation of segregation, the bitter sting of *de jure* discrimination still haunts her daily life. She seals her mind in the present, and while thinking of the steady march toward racial equality, of the victories won, and of the new life she has made possible for her children, she keeps the past at a distance. Then a news story, some random act of racial violence, sends her falling, falling, falling back into the open, waiting arms of Jim Crow. The historical chapters pertaining to the fight for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s remain integral parts of modern

African American identity, and while succeeding generations are effectively removed from them, as Denver was removed from slavery, they still exact presence in African American thought in the 1980s.

A 1980s Beloved, ever the specter of slavery, has taken on many new victims' voices since the 1870s, but she still signifies the breadth of the African American experience in this new trinity. She haunts 1980s African American consciousness as she did the women's house at 124 Bluestone Road: as a sad, ever-present companion with an inclination to make her presence known when she feels she's being forgotten. In the novel, Beloved materializes then Paul D. exorcises her as "crawling already?" baby ghost from 124 Bluestone Road, and it is when this new Beloved is evicted from the community's thought in the 1970s, when the Civil Rights movement finally yielded a "semblance of racial justice,"⁶⁸ that she manifests herself and becomes a problem by the 1980s for the contemporary equivalents of Sethe and Denver.

When the past comes back to destroy a contemporary Sethe and her hope for any further racial reform, Morrison's Trinitarian narrative becomes a warning. If 1980s African America follows Sethe's lead and her symbolic psychological meaning, if they give in to the weight of mounting public and courtroom pressure, if they fail to protect their advances at this crucial post-Civil Rights movement moment, then they will be forced to relinquish those rights and become slaves anew under retrograde politics. With civil rights deteriorating in front of their eyes, the new generation must, as Denver did in the novel, go out into the world and seek help. The young need to advocate, as their parents and grandparents did, for the rights they have now and look boldly into the past, regardless of its horrors, to appreciate how they got them. Finally, the only way to exorcise the past is to collect as a community and, in the verbal recognition of this blatant evil, force it back to the periphery of consciousness where it belongs. With her simple closing

phrase, “this is not a story to pass on,” Morrison both encourages and cautions readers; she urges them to explore, but staunchly resist, the pull of the past. None of the dehumanizing chapters of the African American experience are aspects to “pass on” or ignore because they are too horrific to investigate, but historical terrors should never be allowed to “pass on,” or become so psychologically ever-present that they exert power over present generations.

Morrison’s skill in employing the Trinity allusion to illustrate the multifaceted anguish of a newly freed community in the wake of slavery’s terrors amplifies not only the experience of African Americans in the 1870s, but the modern African American experience during the semi-recent setback to racial equality in the 1980s as well. African American identity, via her allusion to the Trinity, emerges as a complex and powerful combination of harsh recurring memories, a sorrowful distant past, and struggles to forget what ought to never truly be forgotten. Her allusion also intensifies the duality and import of *Beloved*’s closing message, in that all of these individual aspects, as coequal, coeternal, and copowerful, deserve study and understanding. But, as Morrison points out, a balance must exist among them for the continual success of the African American community.

Notes

1. Margret Garner, wife and mother of four, escaped from slavery with her family by fleeing to Southern Ohio in 1865. When the family's former owner arrived to reclaim his "property," Margret was unable to bear the thought of her children living their lives in bondage. Feeling death was preferable to a life enslaved, she murdered her young daughter with a butcher knife. She attempted to kill her remaining children as well, but did not succeed. Carmen Gillespie, *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File, 2008), 19.
2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 315.
3. Ibid., 158.
4. Susan Corey, "Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." In *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, Marc C. Connor (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 41.
5. Morrison, 171.
6. Ibid., 172.
7. Carolyn M. Jones, "Sula and *Beloved*: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison." In *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula*, Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000), 343.
8. Carolyn A. Mitchell, "I Love to Tell the Story: Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*." In *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula*, Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000), 173-87.
9. Ibid., 174.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Nancy Berkowitz Bate, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Psalm and Sacrament." In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*, Shirley A. Stave (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 27.
12. Morrison, 103.
13. Emily Griesinger, "Why Baby Suggs, Holy, Quit Preaching the Word: Redemption and Holiness in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Christianity and Literature* 50, no. 4 (2001).
14. Morrison, 104.
15. Bärbel Höttges, *Faith Matters: Religion, Ethnicity, and Survival in Louise Erdrich's and Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 85.
16. Mitchell, 182.
17. Betty Jane Powell, "Will the Parts Hold?: The Journey Toward a Coherent Self in *Beloved*." In *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula*, Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000), 150-51.
18. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Random House, 1974), forward.
19. Antonio Monda, *Do You Believe?: Conversations on God and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 117-18.
20. Ibid.
21. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2006), 20.

22. Father Leonard Feeney, M.I.C.M., "The Blessed Trinity Explained to Thomas Butler." *The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*: par. 5, <http://catholicism.org/feeney-trinity.html>.
23. Yusef Komunyakaa, "Sorrow Songs and the Flying Away: Religious Influence on Black Poetry." *Cross Currents* 571, (June 2007), 281.
24. Though it has three distinct sections, *Beloved* is not divided into titled or numbered chapters. This "chapter" begins on page 248, near the end of section two.
25. Jeremiah A. Wright, "Words from the Pulpit: Faith in a Foreign Land." *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007): 238.
26. Morrison, *Beloved*, 248-51.
27. Therese E. Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, 2001), 35.
28. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, "Africa's Women have Led in the Past, and Will Lead in the Future." *New African* 500 (Nov. 2010): 78.
29. Morrison, *Beloved*, 188.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 110.
32. Ibid., 234.
33. Ibid., 175.
34. Berkowitz Bate, 54.
35. Morrison, 237.
36. The Nicene Creed, a profession of faith for Catholic Christians, states: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life, Who *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified."
37. USCCB, *Catechism*, 20.
38. Kevin Knight, ed. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. 2008. Question 36, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1036.htm>.
39. Morrison, *Beloved*, 20.
40. Ibid., 69, 147, 144.
41. Ibid., 89.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 93-94.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 12.
46. Ibid., 13.
47. Ibid., 54.
48. USCCB, *Catechism*, 42-3.
49. Morrison, 76, 71.
50. Ibid., 280.
51. Therese E. Higgins, 34.
52. Morrison, 243-47.
53. Ibid., 276.
54. Ibid., 279-80.
55. Betty Jane Powell, 151.

56. Morrison, *Beloved*, 276-77.
57. USCCB, *Catechism*, 20.
58. Morrison, 243-47.
59. *Ibid.*, 221.
60. *Ibid.*, 295-98.
61. Therese E. Higgins, 106.
62. Bärbel Höttges, 95.
63. Robert L. Carter, "Thirty-Five Years Later: New Perspectives on Brown." In *Race in America: The Struggle for Equality*, Herbert Hill and James E. Jones (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 83.
64. Derrick Bell, "Remembrances of Racism Past: Getting Beyond the Civil Rights Decline." In *Race in America: The Struggle for Equality*, Herbert Hill and James E. Jones (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 75.
65. Carter, *New Perspectives*, 84.
66. *Ibid.*, 84, 88.
67. Bell, *Remembrances*, 75.

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