June 1995

"will the parts hold?": The Journey Toward a Coherent Self in Beloved

Betty Jane Powell

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 31, no.2, June 1995, p. 105-113

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
"will the parts hold?": The Journey Toward a Coherent Self in Beloved

by BETTY JANE POWELL

Toni Morrison's Beloved represents a continuum of what Dorothy H. Lee terms the writer's "vision of the human condition," a "preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self" (346). Lee points out that Morrison's earlier novels, The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, and Tar Baby draw upon the inherent need for individual identity within the context of community. In Beloved Toni Morrison writes about the need for victimized people to form an integrated self in the face of a fragmented and unacceptable existence. The obstacles confronting characters while living in the world of slavery ensure fragmentation of both the body and the mind. An environment in which "men and women were moved around like checkers" (23), and given whimsically haphazard names, breaks down the sense of who one is or where one fits into the scheme of things. The fact that "anyone white could take your whole self for anything that comes to mind" (251) denies autonomy and renders the self unrecognizable.

Morrison argues that fiction provides the possibility of "becoming coherent in the world" (Butler-Evans 7), a method through which the fractures brought about by enslavement and alienation from community might be fused. Through the medium of fiction, Morrison sets about the difficult task of fusing such fractures, thereby initiating the possibility of coherence and recognition for the characters in Beloved through freedom and alliance with community. But, as Sethe says, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95); so that many of the characters remain enslaved to a past that they find unspeakable. In order to claim ownership Sethe and the other characters must face the past, speak the unspeakable, and chase away the shadows. Through the recollection and the retelling of fragmented life stories and by forming them into a coherent whole, the characters of Beloved free themselves to yoke together stories and bodies, spirit and flesh, and to begin forging a sense of self that holds the promise of the future.

Morrison's major characters are spiritually and physically fragmented individuals who are disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from community. Such alienation results in an emptiness that overpowers the individual. Baby Suggs carries a sadness "at her center, the desolated center where
the self that was no self made its home” (140); Sethe has empty eyes “that did not pick up a flicker of light. They were two wells” that “needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held” (9); Denver cries “because she has no self” (123); Paul D. wanders the countryside in search of something tangible on which to grasp, carrying his past in “that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (72-73); and Beloved engages in a never-ending struggle to attain cohesion.

The disintegration of self is so complete in Beloved that the characters cannot see or recognize their own bodies, just as they are unable to tell their whole stories. For Morrison the ability to see oneself as physically whole and to appreciate the beauty of one’s body is an integral part of knowing oneself. It is Baby Suggs’s ultimate recognition of her own body that allows for salvation through the gathering together of her neighbors’ bodies and stories in freedom. While entrapped in the “special kind of slavery” (140) that the Garners offer, all reflections that might be used for self-definition have been taken from Baby Suggs. As a woman, her value to her various owners has been to breed and to work; as a wife, the inversion of slavery has forced separation from her husband; and, as a mother, she has had all but one child taken from her, as if they were so much chattel. So Baby Suggs has no “map to discover what she was like” (140). Severed from any possible linkages to self, Baby Suggs questions who she is:

Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me? (140)

When she moves across the line of demarcation from slavery into freedom Baby Suggs gains a new look at herself. In freedom she begins to see herself for the first time, but she sees only in fragments:

She didn’t know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These my hands.” Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? (141)

Drawing on this new discovery, Baby Suggs becomes one of Morrison’s vehicles through which bodies and stories merge. In her preaching to her neighbors in the clearing, she encourages them to recognize the parts of their bodies and to love them as a whole:

Love it hard . . . the skin on your back . . . your hands . . . your mouth . . . feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms . . . your neck . . . all your inside parts . . . and the beat and beating heart, love that too. (88)

Baby Suggs, then, hinges her physical and spiritual coherence on a connection with community, a connection that, for Morrison, reigns supreme in any journey towards self. Her call for a creative vision that repudiates the traditional norms of responsibility and salvation is parallel to Morrison’s vision in the novel (Levy 121): “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure” (88). Rather, she pleads for self-assertion with communal
overtones: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (89). She becomes the matriarch, “Baby Suggs, holy,” and acts as the invoker of spirit, the relayer of messages, and the giver of love. While in the embrace of community Baby Suggs and the house at 124 Bluestone thrive, with 124 becoming a “buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (87). It is with the community’s damnation of Baby Suggs for garnering too much self, following the celebratory feast in Sethe’s honor, and with the baby’s murder, that she decides that “Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color” (4). Color represents “life in the raw” (38), an unadulterated and uncorrupted promise of what life could be, a bright contrast to the “dark and muted” (38) grayness of reality. Significantly, Denver offers Baby Suggs’s quilt with two orange patches to Beloved, rearranging it “so its cheeriest part was in the sick girl’s sight line” (54). While color carries recuperative powers—a suggestion of what life might hold—Morrison warns of delving too deeply into a dream world. Baby Suggs’s immersion into the world of color reverses her connection to community and completes her isolation from others, while coincidentally dissolving whatever gains toward self she had appropriated.

Morrison punctuates this tentative and elusive aspect of self by aligning the fragmentation of intellectual autobiography (stories) to the fragmentation of corporeal bodies (Levy 120). The reader receives stories in bits and pieces, products of fragmented memory, while at the same time receiving fragmented descriptions of characters. By allowing the narrative to focus on particular body parts, Morrison reduces characters to their most elemental state, like memory, while preparing the foundation for coherence. Amy Denver comes to us largely as an image of wild, tangled hair and large hands that massage Sethe’s dead feet back to life; Halle’s face covered in butter surfaces as his most lasting image, and it corresponds with the image of Sethe’s breasts having the milk stolen from them; Beloved continually has problems keeping her parts together, always fearing exploding, “she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces” (133); Baby Suggs bathes Sethe “in sections, starting with her face” (93); and when Sethe severs the “crawling already? baby’s” head from its body, holding “her face so her head would stay on,” (251), Morrison underlines the terrible fact that at any moment bodies (and stories, and therefore lives) can splinter into parts.

If splintering occurs, the disconnected parts must struggle toward reunion, ultimately finding a way to cohere. The sharing of stories provides one avenue towards coherence. Because “story-telling is the primary folk process in Toni Morrison’s fictional world,” the characters in Morrison’s novels tell stories for reasons of “self-dramatization, self-justification, ego-action” but most significantly for “self-understanding” (Skerritt 243, qtd. in Levy 116). But, if, as Andrew Levy suggests, “the scar [of slavery] intrudes on the story ... if history hurts too much—then self-understanding and self-definition are damaged products” (116). Although the results might be damaged, coherence through self-definition in Morrison’s works usually stems from the coupling together of the
pain from the past and the hope for the future through the art of storytelling. In *Beloved* Morrison underscores the difficulty involved in aligning storytelling and memory. Because excruciating pain accompanies memory, stories are uncovered piecemeal, peeling back one thin layer at a time, until the core wound is exposed. This process is further enhanced by Morrison's invention of "rememory." As Ashraf Rushdy points out, with the term "rememory" Morrison adds a new word to the language, connoting both memory and invention (303). "Rememories" allow characters access to events outside their experience and, therefore, outside their memories. As Sethe explains to Denver, a "rememory" "is a picture floating around out there outside my head. . . . Right in the place where it happened" (36). Sethe goes on to tell Denver: "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (36). The gift of "rememory" allows characters to remember and reinvent not only their own stories, but stories of others as well. It offers a way of sharing and diffusing the pain, lifting the burden of memory when it becomes unbearable.

Remembering the past involves for all the characters both a blessing and a curse—on the one hand it sheds light in the darkness, while on the other it causes pain and threatens to become a dangerous obsession. When Baby Suggs complains that all she can remember of her firstborn "is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. . . . Eight children and that's all I remember" (5), Sethe responds "That's all you let yourself remember" (5). But because "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35), as Amy Denver tells Sethe, remembering a past that has been so long repressed becomes painful for Sethe: "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable" (58).

Beloved's arrival in the form of a corporeal body initiates speakability, as Sethe's stories emerge at first haltingly, because "the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (58); but they pick up speed at an increasing rate, reaching a frenzied state as the work progresses. When Beloved asks Sethe to "tell me your diamonds" (58), she not only wants to hear the story of how Mrs. Garner gave diamond earrings to Sethe for a wedding present, but she is also offering to turn the dark stories of Sethe's past into something shining and valuable. The very telling of the story brings Sethe pleasure:

... as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (58)

Because Sethe has hidden from the past, working hard "to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (26), she has cut herself off from her life, preferring to "keep the past at bay" (42), while relinquishing the future. But her "devious brain" and her "terrible memory" will not grant her forgetfulness, nor will they allow for coherence. Because her brain and her memory open up and shut down sporadi-
cally and unpredictably, and because when stories do come, they come in "short replies or rambling, incomplete reveries" (58), Sethe is rendered a victim of her past. Although Paul D. initially seems to open possibilities, with his "smile and . . . upfront love" that make "her try" to tell her story (159), Sethe finds that "she could never pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain" (163). In addition, Paul D. has his own "tobacco tin" filled with secrets, and approaches Sethe with a tentative restraint and a conditional love. Beloved, on the other hand, accepts Sethe for who she is, and, although her love turns malevolent toward the end, the acceptance is unconditional. Beloved's hunger for stories allows Sethe to make peace with her own tortured "rememory" (191); "I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all" (183). Sethe begins to relive the past and begins to gather together the fragments of her life.

But Sethe's movement toward coherence depends on Beloved's ability to bring spirit and body to a state of cohesion. Beloved's difficulty, and ultimate failure, in forming and maintaining a self (both physical and spiritual), stems at least in part from her ephemeral characterization in the novel. Who or what is she? Is Beloved the corporeal reincarnation of the unnamed "crawling already? baby"; is she, as Deborah Horvitz argues, "the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds—generations of mothers and daughters—hunted down and stolen from Africa" (157); or is she a flesh and blood human being, yet another slave woman held captive by white men to satiate their own perverted desire, as Elizabeth House postulates? She represents all of these things, as Morrison utilizes Beloved's character in such a way that renders final categorization impossible. As Beloved searches for "a place to be" (75), the various possibilities for her identity urge the narrative along. Morrison invites the reader to suspend disbelief, while Beloved struggles to find and sustain life, thriving on the life stories of those around her.

For Sethe, however, Beloved is the receptacle for her stories, "the one and only person she felt she had to convince" (251), and "Sethe's greatest fear was that Beloved might leave . . . before Sethe could make her understand what it meant" (251). Beloved struggles to maintain corporeal substance, drinking "cup after cup of water" (51), and gorging herself on sweets, "honey as well as the wax it came in, sugar sandwiches, the sludgy molasses gone hard and brutal in the can, lemonade, taffy and any type of dessert Sethe brought home from the restaurant" (55), a glucose-like mixture. Her physical hunger grows more ravenous as the work progresses, as does her hunger for stories, and her body grows in proportion, "her belly protruding like a winning watermelon" (250), pregnant with stories. But Beloved is continually in fear of exploding, falling to pieces, or being chewed up. When Beloved loses a tooth she thinks, "This is it. Next it would be her arms, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once" (133)—Morrison's comment on the fragility of the self, and the characters' tenuous grasp on identity.

In a search for self-definition, stories, like corporeal bodies, must be gathered together and eventually lie together, so that both a narrative and a physical
intercourse take place. Within the slave system, the merging of bodies is largely brought about by rape, beatings, and the marking of bodies, fostering and reinforcing negative images of self—the very acts that cause the splintering of memory (and therefore stories) in the first place. But in *Beloved* it is the consensual intercourse of bodies and stories that brings the hope for recognition and salvation, however tenuous. Certainly Morrison suggests a flicker of hope for communion between the races with the contact between Amy and Sethe. Morrison reverses the roles here, with the white Amy nurturing and soothing a tortured black Sethe. Amy not only nurtures Sethe physically, but she nurtures her with her story and song as well. Sethe listens to Amy’s humming, “a humming she concentrated on” (80), and conjures an image of carmine velvet, while Amy, in her pitiful, but romantic, way, attempts to render something beautiful out of the mark left on Sethe’s back by Schoolteacher’s boys: “It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. . . . Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom” (79). Such instances of affection and symbiosis with others bring moments of cohesion throughout the work. Sethe, Beloved, and Denver merge into a gender reversal of the Trinity—Mother, Daughter(s), and Spirit—while ice skating on a frozen pond. This connection represents the only instance in which the three women cohere without vying for each other’s attention: “holding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice,” laughing in a microcosm in which “nobody saw them fall” (174). On the frozen pond, divorced from the probing eyes of society, the women are free to see each other and to see themselves without the fear of recrimination.

A similar symbiotic need precipitates Paul D.’s effort to fill Sethe’s emptiness and brings him to recall Sixo’s remark about his Thirty-Mile Woman, and how “the pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (272-73). Placing parts (bodies and stories) in the right order becomes paramount to recognition of self (just as it does in writing a novel), so that Paul D. initiates the merging by wanting “to put his story next to hers” (273). Just as the novel attempts to realign the fragments into an orderly whole, Paul D.’s act of placing his story next to Sethe’s attempts both narrative and physical cohesion. When Paul D. “leans over and takes her hand,” and “with the other he touches her face,” and tells Sethe “You your best thing, Sethe. You are,” she answers “Me? Me?” (273). Although her response can be read as “only ambiguously hopeful” (Levy 121), it can also be read as standing on the threshold of enlightenment. Sethe has for the first time had such an idea of self broached to her, and the interrogative suggests an opening up, rather than a shutting down.

Stories open up all sorts of possibilities throughout *Beloved*, and are very often used as a kind of barter in the same way that bodies are bartered. Just as Sethe exchanges “ten minutes for seven letters” (5) on Beloved’s headstone, because her body is all she has to sell, Denver trades partially manufactured stories in exchange for Beloved’s attention. The unspeakability of the past at 124 Bluestone has isolated Denver and has denied her access to autonomy. She, in effect, is rendered a slave to her mother’s and grandmother’s past lives—until Beloved’s appearance. With Beloved’s arrival, Denver becomes her own narra-
tor of stories, constructing “out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved” (76). Just as Morrison gives life to Margaret Garner’s story through the writing of *Beloved*, Denver anticipates Beloved’s hunger for detail “by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat” (79). But because remembering and storytelling entail the “concept of mental recollection and construction that is never only personal but always interpersonal” (Rushdy 304), Morrison places the two women in a conspiracy of reconstruction that feeds the needs of both: “Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was” (79).

This sort of sharing is crucial to creating a history and a sense of self, not only for Denver but for all of Morrison’s characters who venture out on a quest for self. Without connection characters fail in their journeys: Sula (*Sula*) is unable to connect fruitfully with the external world, becomes a pariah in her own community and finally dies; Son and Jade (*Tar Baby*) experience dreams, needs, and desires that are at cross-purposes and that result in separation and loss (Lee 350, 355). In *Beloved* Morrison strongly suggests that too much connection with the past can become obsessive and render people immobile in their ability to connect with others. During the time in which the bond between Denver, Beloved, and Sethe holds, Denver remains complacent with her situation. But with the severing of that bond, with Denver’s exclusion from the Trinity, when the two women “cut Denver out of their games” (234), she realizes that “it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would” (239). It is Denver’s act of leaving the world of storytelling, knowing the past, but going on, that provides her with a sense of self and enables her to save Sethe. She marvels at the “new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (252). Denver emerges at the end of the work as “a strategist” (121), a young woman with a freshly awakened motivation: “Plotting has changed Denver markedly. Where she was once indolent, resentful of every task, now she is spry, executing” (121). She becomes the most cohesive character, the only character who seems to have a concrete sense of who she is and where she is going.

Whereas Denver appears to escape from a past that at once nurtures and possesses, Sethe becomes increasingly mired in it. Beloved’s voracious hunger for Sethe’s stories consumes Sethe: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became. . . . Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (250). Sethe regresses into a kind of masochistic remembering in which frenzied storytelling saps her of agency—she becomes Beloved’s possession. With Denver out of the house, moving toward connection with community, Sethe and Beloved are left in the clutch of destruction and annihilation. Beloved transforms into the abusive mother, “Sethe the teething child” (251), with Beloved “getting bigger, plumper by the day” and Sethe starving: “the flesh between her . . . forefinger and thumb was as thin as china silk” (239). Once again, salvation springs up from community with others, and once again it comes about as the result of storytelling.
Denver trades the story of her mother to Lady Jones, Lady Jones, in turn, tells the story to the community, and the community responds with “gifts of food”—“a sack of white beans . . . a plate of cold rabbit . . . a basket of eggs” (249).

Further cohesion comes in the form of Ella and the other women in the community. Ella, whom Morrison describes as a “practical woman” (256), sees the future as “sunset” and the past as “something to leave behind” (257). Because Ella thinks of the past as something she “might have to stomp out,” she does not “like the idea of past errors taking possession of the future” (256). Ella had in the past delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by the “lowest yet.” It lasted five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaws working. (258-59)

She, unlike Sethe, understands the danger of residing too long in the past. Since Beloved represents the corporeal embodiment of the past, Sethe’s repository for stories, Ella and the other women rise up to squash her impending threat to subsume not only Sethe, but themselves as well. The women group together in front of 124 Bluestone, at first “whispering and murmuring” (258), but building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The gathering together of individual voices into a coherent unit expels the past at least to a point that will allow healing and perhaps forgetting. By gathering the women into a unified voice, Morrison empowers that voice to “identify those things in the past that are useful and those that are not” (Butler-Evans 7), a role she delegates to her novels as well. The past, in the form of Beloved, “the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away” (274).

When Beloved exits the work, she carries with her (in her) much of the rage and torment experienced by the various characters, thereby opening some opportunity for cohesion of self. She carries Denver’s isolation and fear of “the thing that leapt up” and “coiled around her” (104); she carries with her the contents of Paul D.’s “tobacco tin”; she carries with her, by extension, the pain and outrage of the community of ex-slaves; and she carries Sethe’s darkest “rememories.” The past, at least temporarily, has served its purpose. As Beloved “erupts into her separate parts,” the other characters connect with one another, as their bodies and stories begin to cohere into intelligible selves. But because it seems an ambivalent coherence, Morrison leaves the reader asking, along with Sethe, “will the parts hold?” (273).
BETTY JANE POWELL

Works Cited


