

# Representation of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Work

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2024**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:552683>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-11-28**



**Sveučilište u Zadru**  
Universitas Studiorum  
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |

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Anglistika



**Maja Antičević**

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Zadar, 2024



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Zadar, 20. rujna 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

Regardless of the scale or the impact of an event that would cause *trauma*, it seems to be omnipresent in our society. On a personal, communal, historical and global level it pervades every pore of the human fabric. We are shaped by our experiences, our lives are moulded by the cultural and historical circumstances of our environment. Historical events such as WWI, WWII, Holocaust, AIDS epidemic, 9/11, COVID are only some of the many impactful events that left an indelible mark on our global community. Aftershocks of those events reverberated through literature, cinema, architecture, mass media and other fields of human expression. Literature has shown itself to be one of the most poignant avenues through which those aftershocks can be exhibited to the masses and have an impact on the way we understand and perceive trauma. Personal and communal “traumatic” devastation has been captured many times in the literary form and has proven to be able to engage audiences and inform them simultaneously. Nevertheless, what of the aftershocks on an individual level, the aftershocks within a community and how do they correlate? How to approach personal devastation on a smaller scale? How to analyse and signify trauma and survival when there is no measuring unit for it?

Therefore, it is crucial to conceptualize traumatic events; approach and analyse them with the care and dedication of their singular origins. I aim to give an overview of trauma and traumatic events represented in the literary work of Toni Morrison, from various cultural and psychological points of view. Her novels *Beloved* and *Home* have been chosen as the source material of this thesis because even though the first novel is set in the 1870s and the latter in the 1950s, almost enveloping a century between them; the circumstances alter, but Morrison’s characters share similar if not the same plights. What’s more, their response and the way they live and operate within and after their traumatic events remain similar too.

## 2. Trauma

The term trauma encompasses many disciplinary forms, and is one of the rare concepts that can employ multiple fields of study, in order to showcase the effect it has on individuals and to societies at large. Psychology, sociology, history, psychiatry and literature are only some of the disciplines that can be used to analyse its effect, origins and development. In order to elucidate the term of trauma and traumatic experience Cathy 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.” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11)

It is exactly that response to the traumatic event that raises questions. When faced with an imminent threat, upon observing the way an individual reacts to the initial event and overcomes it is valuable, as the response becomes the crucial part of the trauma experience. Especially, if it is a life-threatening situation when the experience of survival takes over. In trauma theory, championed by Caruth, the break in one’s individual psyche, i.e. the way one processes the threat is the crucial part of surviving. Often, the mind registers the threat too late resulting in “shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death” which results in the threat never being fully experienced and processed rationally, causing the act of missing of this experience - the rationalization and processing of the event in real time, unknown to the mind itself. (*Unclaimed Experience* 62) It is that rupture, the missed step in the process, and the belated response that haunt the individual and exhibit the fracture in one’s mind:

Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life. (*Unclaimed Experience* 62)

### 2.1. Trauma in Literature

Regarding the representation of trauma in literature, La Capra in his seminal work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* stated one of the most salient concepts of writing about trauma,

which is that trauma itself “brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel.” (LaCapra 42) So it can be seen how challenging it is to write about trauma. As mentioned earlier in the Trauma section, traumatic events are not always fully assimilated and processed in time within one’s psyche so it is exactly that rupture which proves to be an interesting topic to write about.

The mental state of the survivor, the general aftershocks of trauma, and the consequences of those events have been consistently represented in literature and its respective literary forms. Especially because literature has the capacity to present trauma in a narrative form and can give meaning to “harmful or overwhelming phenomena which are believed to have deeply harmed collective identity.” (Visser 110) Consequently, it becomes a major part of processing trauma as it gives opportunity to victims/characters to voice their pain, give their own representation of the events and hopefully reach closure and fill out the rupture in their consciousness. Through the narrative arc of Morrison’s character in the chosen novels it is evident that through their recounting of their stories and survival their goal was to: “overcome a pathological relation to the traumatic past, to be relieved of its violent insistence, in order to recover a sense of self and the possibility of community” (Luckhurst 96)

## 2.2. Trauma within Race

The chosen novels along with Morrison’s work in general, delve into the racial history of the United States of America. From the harsh reality of an enslaved existence, the aftereffects of the abolition movement and life in freedom, to the daily racism that was experienced by her characters, especially in the South. There are several instances of racial-based trauma; in *Beloved* there is Sethe’s daily life at the plantation Sweet Home and the debasing attack by her owners, her mother being burned alive and Baby Suggs’ entire life spent in enslavement. In *Home*, it is seen in Ycindra’s employment by a eugenicist doctor who believed in white supremacy and mutilated her for life, and a young black boy attacked and maimed by a white



cop for playing with a wooden pistol. Such events lead to “many of the African–American characters (to) carry a traumatic moment of violence, humiliation or subjective death, which leaves them in a similar condition of circling what they are defined by and cannot confront, unable to communicate their story.” (Luckhurst 91) Faced with prejudice, hatred and disdain, in Morrison’s work her communities choose to come together to find joy, understanding and compassion among each other. For them, there is no external validation and help coming from systems that used to own them and continue to oppress them. That is why they have developed

psychological, somatic, and cultural effects that individuals and groups suffer as a consequence of being racialized (due to) an official racially oppressive system or as an outcome of residual racist discourses and practices, certain categories of people are still victimized solely on the basis of their association with a certain race (Dragulescu 271)

### 3. Toni Morrison

In 1931, Chloe Ardelia Wofford was born. Globally known as Toni Morrison, she was one of the most influential authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: novelist, poet, editor, and university professor. Her illustrious career changed the cultural landscape of the United States of America and its respective literary canon. In 1977 she received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her novel *Song of Solomon*. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 for her novel *Beloved*, considered to be her most significant work. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In 2012 she was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian order in the United States. She died in 2019.

The novel follows Sethe, and her daughter Denver in their, at times, literal and figurative cohabitation with the ghost of the murdered daughter, Beloved. Their story is narrated in a non-linear, unconventional way through flashbacks, characters’ reminiscing, and storytelling which immerse the reader within the intricate family dynamic. Rejected by the local black community, Sethe and Denver are the last occupants of 124, a name given to their house by Howard and Buglar, Sethe’s sons who ran away from the haunted house. Baby Suggs, the matriarch of the family passed away eight years before the events of the novel unfolded but

her teaching and her soul pervade the story. The arrival of Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men, disrupts any accustomed routine when he banishes the ghost away. However, the tentative outreach of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D to their community and an improved future comes to an abrupt stop when a young woman who goes by the name of Beloved appears at the steps of their house.

For *Beloved*, Morrison found inspiration in the historical figure of Margaret Garner, a cause célèbre who murdered her daughter in order to prevent another life lived in slavery. Yet, Sethe, the character Morrison created, would be the canvas of a more complex figure who would: "...represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom." (*Beloved* xi)

Morrison explored a great array of themes in *Beloved*, such as the issue of forming an identity after spending years, or a lifetime as in Baby Suggs' case, in the harrowing conditions of slavery with no agency whatsoever. Moreover, the murder itself provokes a multitude of reactions and polemics. Was Sethe correct to think that death is preferred to a life spent in enslavement? Is there a place for morality and ethics, in such a convoluted space and time where one is not even free to love and care for their own child, and is subjected to torture and viewed as a less-than, an animal; as she says:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you...Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up... And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper." (*Beloved* 295-296)

*Home* was published in 2012 and as such falls under the later work of Toni Morrison. The novel follows a soldier of African-American descent, Frank Money; his return from the Korean War and the subsequent attempt at moving on with his life. Held back by memories of losing his oldest friends and comrades in war, hindered by his addiction to alcohol, he ruins his relationship with an ambitious young woman, Lily. The demise of their relationship exacerbates his state as it states that: "When he lay with the girl-weight of her arm on his

chest, the nightmares folded away and he could sleep. When he woke up with her, his first thought was not the welcome sting of whiskey.” (*Home* 15) Yet, even though the reason of their break up is Frank’s noble departure to find and help his sister Ycindra, the relationship was broken beforehand. Ycindra, or Cee how she’s referred to throughout the novel, is Frank’s younger sister, who married young and was promptly left by her husband. Consequently, in a need for a better paying job she found employment at a eugenic doctor’s practice who performed severe operations on her that left long-lasting consequences. As Cee lamented herself, as she was browsing the doctor’s medical texts, it was her own ignorance that kept her in that dangerous situation: “How small, how useless was her schooling, she thought, and promised herself she would find time to read about and understand ‘eugenics’.” (*Home* 42)

#### 4. Beloved

In the foreword of the novel, Toni Morrison says: “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population – just as the characters were snatched from one place to another...without preparation or defense.” (*Beloved* xii) One way she managed to convey that displacement, and succeeded in making the reader feel equally unmoored as the characters was with her usage of rememory.

##### 4.1. Rememory

To begin with, in order to explain rememory from a physiological point of view, it would be a retrieval of painful, traumatic memories that is, most of the time, caused by finding oneself in an environment that closely resembles the state in which those events occurred. The circumstances could be completely different, but it only takes one element to bring that retrieval of memories forward:

The more the contextual stimuli resemble conditions prevailing at the time of the original storage, the more retrieval is likely. Thus, memories are reactivated when a person is

exposed to a situation, or is in a somatic state, reminiscent of the one when the original memory was stored. (*Trauma: Explorations in memory* 174)

In Sethe's case, it is seen at the very beginning of the novel that she experiences rememory without the contextual stimuli. In the first situation it is seen here: "...she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately, her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field...Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back..." (*Beloved* 6) and further along we find out that there was no olfactory stimulus of: "... the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made." (6). Moreover, the ink proves to be especially triggering for Sethe, as it serves the double injury of her having made it for the Schoolteacher and his nephews; and those men while she was milked thus "forc(ed) Sethe to occupy the position of a degraded animality (neither horse nor cow, but goat)." (Forster 72) Additionally, the mere act of 'nursing' her "through a violent sexuality that reproduces while it denies her maternal connection, is to assert masculine and racial autonomy" (Moglen 27) lays heavy on Sethe's mind as her urgent wish, while running away, was to get to her daughter as soon as possible to nurse her: "I walked right on by because only me had your milk, and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you." (*Beloved* 233)

Yet, there are several instances where Sethe is reliving a memory due to a specific stimuli. During her storytelling to the girls, while she was answering questions about her mother she stumbles upon a memory that she suppressed, when the smell of a hot comb going through Denver's hair affects her so: "'Oh my Jesus,'" she said and stood up so suddenly(...) the comb fell to the floor... She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind..." (*Beloved* 73) Later on, it is disclosed in the novel that her mother was burned alive, and as a child Sethe witnessed it.

However, the most impactful instance of rememory happens towards the end of the novel, when an exhausted, emaciated Sethe mistakes the past for the present, and upon seeing Edward Bodwin, a former benefactor, and an abolitionist arriving to her house she relives the moment with the Schoolteacher. Yet, this time, she will go after the white man in order to protect ‘her best thing’: “And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand.” (*Beloved* 309) In that moment, when Sethe, a traumatized person, was confronted with a nearly identical contextual stimuli, she stopped being aware of her current predicament (standing at the porch, holding Beloved’s hand, listening to the women’s song) and she reacted as if she was reliving the past threat. Thus in that mental state she: “lost the mental synthesis that constitutes reflective will and belief; (which) simply transform(ed) into automatic wills and beliefs (of) the impulses which are momentarily the strongest.” (*Trauma: Explorations in memory* 174-175) In the past and in that current situation, the impulse that prevailed was to protect her daughter, to the best of her abilities, and the rememory remained.

#### 4.2. The Power of Community

Holy Baby Suggs was an unchurched preacher who gathered the community at the Clearing, their place of healing: “a place in flux and transition –a place from which one may decide to move forward to the future or be moved back and be fixed by the past.” (Jesser 326-327) There, she preached the importance of self-love in a world that despises their features, their people, and their mere existence:

They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, *you!* (*Beloved* 103-104)

With those words, she establishes a juxtaposition of the vitriolic hate that their community endures with the unbridled kind of love they must have for themselves. The encouraging and the assurance they receive is:” at once personal—“You got to love it,

you”—and collective; it is precisely a ritual of love in which each person’s affirmation of flesh is consecrated and rendered “real” through the flesh’s collective affirmation.” (Forster 86)

The importance of community and their social or healing gatherings, whether at the Clearing or at 124 Bluestone, is fundamental to the black community, as faced with the harsh truth of their lives, they find comfort and support among and with each other: “when feelings of hurt move to the centre of people’s being and make them feel “marked, maybe cursed, maybe even dead,” this sense of difference can draw people to others similarly marked, and in this way can serve as a source of community” (Visser 109) Yet, even though Grandma Baby Suggs gave her ‘great, big, old heart’ to the community, the actions of her daughter-in-law put a stop to the their gatherings at the Clearing, subsequently causing a chasm between the household 124 and the rest of the Cincinnati: “124 shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost. No more lamp all night long, or neighbors dropping by. No low conversations after supper... There was no grace – imaginary or real – and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that.” (*Beloved* 105)

Still, even though there is a rift between the rest of the black community and the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road, at the most crucial moment, the women of the black community were there for Sethe, and especially for Denver, who over the course of the novel abandons her exile and becomes a fully integrated part of the community in order to: “overcome a pathological relation to the traumatic past, to be relieved of its violent insistence, ... to recover a sense of self and the possibility of community.” (Luckhurst 96) Therefore, when Denver gathers her courage to venture out of their household, and seeks help from the community she is met with the kindness of strangers. In the following quote one can see how monumental that support and acceptance were to her that: “She didn’t know it then, but it was the word “baby,” said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman.” (*Beloved* 292) When her mother attacks Bodwin, it was Denver and the women who put a stop to it, and prevented another catastrophe for the community. Furthermore, prior to it,

the woman were gathered before 124 in order to help Sethe to break away from the hold Beloved had over her: “Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did, it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water...It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.” (*Beloved* 308) Bringing the ceremony of the Clearing to 124 it made “the enactment of collective memory...a timeless present into a future of possibilities by redeeming the past.” (Moglen 35)

#### 4.3. The Effect of Trauma on Identity

When it comes to the issue of identity, and perceiving oneself after enduring a traumatic event, or several of traumatic events, there are multiple instances of such crisis in this novel. As we can see in the following quote of Baby Suggs explaining Denver the boundaries and the purpose of a slave’s body: “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them.” (*Beloved* 247) The purpose being: “a breeder: herself property, she reproduces property in her children. Without legal status or acknowledged familial connection, both male and female slaves are excluded from the world of social subjects.” (Moglen 27)

Furthermore, in another one of Baby Suggs’ recollections the reader is presented with an account of all the harrowing experiences she lived through, such as the fact that all of her children, save for Halle, were taken away from her and sold, so she: “did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive,” (*Beloved* 165) Additionally, it showcases what a life spent in slavery and being stripped of any sense of individuality resulted in: “fact was she knew more about them (her children) than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like...Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favour me? If my mother knew me would she like me? ” (*Beloved* 165) Also, it is important to note then

even while pondering herself she still does not question herself as an individual, but with: “no recognition of herself except in relation to the family entity.” (Vickroy 146)

Conversely, in Sethe’s reminiscing about her escape with her children one can see how differently Sethe views herself: “I did it. I got us all out. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to.” (Beloved 190) highlighting the satisfaction of using her knowledge and her strength for herself and her children; not for an owner but to have a sense of her own agency and importance: “Me using my own head...It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right.” (Beloved 190) By doing so Sethe has usurped “the mastering narrative (that) cast her in the role of property, or victim, or prisoner” (Jesser 341) and gave her a sense of pride and ownership.

Finally, upon having her freedom bought and stepping on free land Baby Suggs has a moment of reacquainting herself with her body. A body that is solely hers, for the first time in her life. Not a property, or a breeder, or a subhuman creature. She is finally free:

What’s the matter? She asked herself. 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 thing she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? (*Beloved* 166)

## 5. Home

In Home there are a multitude of themes to delve into: the strength and the absence of familial love, the juxtaposition of serving one’s country only to find discrimination and racism thriving in it –as seen in the case of a young black boy being shot by a police officer: “He had a cap pistol. Eight years old, running up and down the sidewalk pointing it. Some redneck rookie felt his dick was underappreciated by his brothers’ cops.” (Home 20); and finally finding peace and contentment at Lotus, Georgia – the place where their initial trauma and the place they eagerly abandoned with the first given opportunity. As Morrison stated in an



interview, upon their return and Frank's bewilderment at the lush nature and harmonious scenery would indicate: “ (that) the reader would feel that he or she had returned to a place that was—you know, they may not like you, but they're not gonna hurt you.” (*The New Yorker*)

### 5.1. Rememory

At the very beginning of the novel, Frank Money's trauma is visceral and visible as he struggles in his return to society, following the Korean War, trying to find a single image that would soothe his mind and not trigger any painful memories, yet: “Everything reminded him of something loaded with pain.” (Home 4) As a shell-shocked individual he exhibits clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and per the American Psychiatric Association (APA) it is classified as a mental disorder that develops after a psychologically traumatic event that transcends the range of the usual human experience. (APA, 236) Furthermore, it is transmitted through symptoms such as: “re-experiencing the traumatic event; numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world” and the most important aspect of it, which would be “(the) intensification of symptoms by “exposure to events that symbolize or resemble the traumatic event” (APA, 236-237)

One of the most important examples of such behaviour is visible in Frank's return to the civilian world, after being discharged from the army: “The station noise was so abrasive, though, that he reached for a sidearm. None was there, of course, so he leaned against a steel support until the panic died down.” (Home 18) The auditory stimuli, commotion and the hectic pace of the station pushed forward the memory of the battlefield which in turn caused his flight or fight instinct to emerge, thus he reached for his sidearm to protect himself – standard reaction of a soldier. Later on, he experiences visual hallucinations, during “a clouded state of consciousness” where “a reduction in the clarity of awareness of the environment” (APA 104) arises and he suffers from vivid hallucinations such as: “dogs or birds eating the remains of his comrades” (Home 22) or “he saw a boy pushing his entrails

back in, holding them in his palms like a fortune-teller's globe ... or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama. And he was stepping over them ... to stay alive, to keep his own face from dissolving, his own colorful guts under that oh-so-thin sheet of flesh" (Home 13)

In situations like those, he completely disconnects from the external world and suffers from: "a difficulty in sustaining attention to both external and internal stimuli, sensory misperception, and a disordered stream of thought." (APA 104) which his psyche presents as true, actual events and provoke an emotional response and keep him reliving the anguish of the battlefield and the sorrow of losing his comrades. In his own words: whatever the surroundings. They never went away, these pictures." (Home 13) and he is doomed to experience them all over again, with or without any contextual stimuli.

In one instance of rememory we see Frank and Lily, his partner at a church picnic where Frank is upended by a sight of a young Korean girl reaching up:

smack in the middle of all that cold sunlight and warm gaiety, Frank bolted. They had been standing at a table ... when a little girl with slanty eyes reached up ... to grab a cupcake. Frank leaned over to push the platter closer to her. When she gave him a broad smile of thanks, he dropped his food and ran through the crowd. (Home 49)

Afterwards, as Frank reminisces, he delves further into the story of a young Korean child and relates that she was murdered by his relief guard: "she raises up and in ... a hurried, even automatic, gesture... says something in Korean. Sounds like "Yum-yum." She smiles, reaches for the soldier's crotch, touches it. It surprises him. Yum-yum?" (Home 61) Looking back to the scene he remembers the soldier blowing her head off next, and detached from the situation, Frank muses on the soldier's possible motive reaching the conclusion that the soldier was not only disgusted but also tempted by the child. It is vital to note the disconnection with which Frank relates the story, even though he is alarmed by the sight of a random young Korean girl, and relates the story many times throughout the novel.

Finally, after a heartfelt conversation with his sister, where she informs him that she cannot have a child of her own Frank is met with the resounding truth of his actions: “I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me. I felt so proud grieving over my dead friends. How I loved them. How much I cared about them, missed them. My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame.” (Home 86) What is interesting to note about that revelation and the rememory itself, is the way Morrison used it to showcase Frank’s complex understanding of trauma, the one he experienced and the one he inflicted too; the fact that he aligned himself with the position of a victim even though, in the most basic capacity of a soldier he still wielded a certain amount of power. As stated in *Worlds of Hurt*, plenty of literary, even clinical narratives: “places the combat soldier simply in the victim’s role; helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home” however “The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it.” (Tal 10-11) and Morrison showcased that dichotomy in its truest form.

## 5.2. The Power of the Community

To begin with, Morrison points out that she used the „Green Book” during her writing process of *Home*, a guide originated out of necessity - to provide a list of establishments that were relatively safe and welcoming to African-Americans. She used it so she could: “have him go there and have porters, or preachers, or friends that he had met in a restaurant, tell him where he could sleep or take him in.” (*The New Yorker*) That guidance and support of his society proves crucial in his search for Cee, mainly: “since a community’s sense of stability and continuity is closely predicated on its sense of self...” (Visser 110) To elaborate, their community offers its full support, simply because they have suffered, and have been shunned the same way Frank and Ycindra have and at the core sense of their society, there is an impulse to aid their brothers and sisters, simply because historically it was the only support they had. By aiding, they will extend that helping hand, to the next individual in need and the

support will continue as it can be seen in Lotus, miles away: “They were generous to strangers. An outsider passing through was welcomed—even, or especially, if he was running from the law.” (Home 29)

After escaping the mental hospital, Frank finds himself failed by the system, penniless – as the last money he had was stolen in the institution that was supposed to aid him. However, he finds shelter and help at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church where the Reverend and his family clothe him and give him the last pair of shoes they own, along with all the money they had left – seventeen dollars, so he could find his sister. Along with those items, he was given instructions to find the next benefactor in his journey: “It was that quick, down-home friendliness that led Frank to talk freely to the man on the stool next to his...” (Home 18) who provides him with accommodation, in his own house, for the night and helps him with his trip, thus underlining the eagerness with which members of the black community help each other in their time of need. In *Trauma and Literature*, there is a sentence that says: “if humanity is achieved through community, to be separated from that community is to experience the loss of one’s own sense of selfhood.” (Still 312) In Frank’s case, the communal experience, the ready help from complete strangers and later on, the return to their home town of Lotus signify: “the pleasure of being among those who do not want to degrade or destroy you... This feeling of safety and goodwill, he knew, was exaggerated, but savoring it was real.” (Home 75-76)

Concerning the role of women in their society, in bell hooks’ famous work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* she boldly makes a stand that non-white women who experienced abuse: “cannot afford to see themselves solely as “victims” because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess” (bell 46) and it is a stance that Morrison thoroughly champions through the female population of Lotus. The women of Lotus mobilized immediately upon seeing Cee’s forlorn, emaciated, exhausted

body, held by her brother who saved her from a certain death. Miss Ethel Fordham, the unspoken leader of their community took pity on her and ushered a wave of women eager to revive Cee. They rallied around her:

Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others in looks, dress, manner of speech, food and medical preferences, their similarities were glaring. There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything... They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. (Home 79)

Furthermore, they rallied around her with tough love and saw her current state as if: “(sickness) were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping. They didn’t waste their time or the patient’s with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt.” (Home 78) Defiantly, they faced Cee’s weakness, and fiercely, unflinchingly fought against her feeble body and weakened spirit. They allowed no man to enter and disturb Cee’s healing process. Scornfully, they refused even the notion of a doctor, turning to their traditional healing practices. Most importantly, with their grit and determination they helped reshape Cee’s way of seeing herself as for those women it: “would be psychologically demoralizing ... to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources” (bell 46) which results in Cee’s revival and personal growth because in her mind, she finally reshapes the perception of her own self, and lays foundation to the woman that emerges.

### 5.3. The Effect of Trauma on Identity

The metamorphosis of Cee’s character is one of the most interesting portrayals of the effect of trauma on identity. Having been born on the road while her family was moving to Georgia, she receives the epithet of a “gutter child” by her step-grandmother, Lenore. Lenore was verbally abusive to both siblings but found conditions of Cee’s birth a great failing. What’s worse Cee “had agreed with the label and believed herself worthless” (Home 84) Their overworked parents were absent figures in their lives, so Cee’s only companion and champion was Frank. Following his enlistment to the army, and feeling stifled by the

community's lack of boundaries she flees Lotus. Afterwards, she forms an ill-advised marriage, is left by her husband, becomes employed by Dr. Beau, who in the guise of helping black women conducts experiments and mutilates their reproductive systems and leaves Cee on the verge of life and death.

Following those events, it is not surprising her personality, i.e. "(the) deeply ingrained patterns of behavior, which include the way one relates to, perceives, and thinks about the environment and oneself" (APA 366) was passive, susceptible to sorrow and defeatist. She had very little self-esteem and the small amounts of independence and self-reliance that she had rapidly declined throughout her hardships. In her own words: "What she felt was bigger than that. She was broken. Not broken up but broken down, down into her separate parts. (Home 34)

However, after she endured the tough love of the women of Lotus and physically healed she has a conversation with Miss Ethel who turned to nurturing love and in one of the most important passages states a plea for the woman that Cee is shaping up to be:

See what I mean? Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (Home 81)

Throughout Miss Ethel's impassioned plea, Cee was silent but "she will graduate from silence to defensive posturing to imagistic revelations of repressed emotion, to a real voice informed by recovered memory and mature perspective." (Vickroy 134) During Cee's rationalization of that speech, and all the events she endured and survived she will reach her own conclusion. The final step of overcoming her trauma is evident, as she accepts the sequence of her life and finally gains independence and the mental fortitude to carry on:" So it was just herself. In this world with these people she wanted to be the person who would never again need rescue. (Home 83-84)

The change in her character is evident as Frank himself states that: “They delivered unto him a Cee who would never again need his hand over her eyes or his arms to stop her murmuring bones.” (Home 82-83) He relinquishes his role of her protector as she is now able to confidently state that she no longer needs him to shelter her from the hurt and the world: “It’s just as sad as it ought to be and I’m not going to hide from what’s true just because it hurts.” (Home 85). Through her own merit and strengths she is able “to overcome a pathological relation to the traumatic past, to be relieved of its violent insistence, in order to recover a sense of self...” (Luckhurst 96)

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis, an attempt to overview of the way Toni Morrison represented trauma in her work was made, and an in-depth analysis of some of the most important concepts when it comes to trauma; the way it was presented in literature and the way it affected the African-American community was given. An in-depth analysis of crucial terminology such as rememory, PTSD, Morrison’s choices to accentuate the role and the power of the community, along with the effect of trauma on one’s identity and examples of those instances through the literary text were some of the concepts that were delved into. Their exploration has been crucial, especially in today’s society when the concept of *trauma* has been trivialized and has in a way lost its gravitas, simply due to careless usage of the term. Status of literary canon of American literature and the Western world has been achieved by Toni Morrison and after reading her work, one hopes it is obvious why she is so highly esteemed and why her novels are read globally. Finally, along with the overview of the way Morrison represented trauma in these two novels; stories of the human spirit and the human condition were found at the heart of these narratives, with the key messages of survival, resilience, strength, revival, acceptance and self-love.

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## 8. Representation of Trauma in Toni Morrison's Work

### Summary and key words

The concept of trauma has experienced an increased popularity in usage in modern society, along with the analytical framework and terminology that has developed within the nascent narratives. Literature has proven to be a fruitful field for expressing the nuances of the traumatic condition; and the existence of trauma within race remains a vital aspect of societal circumstances. In Toni Morrison's work, particularly in novels *Beloved* and *Home*, great importance has been placed on establishing narratives that can showcase traumatic events, their consequences and repercussions along with the hope-filled survivals and revivals. Through the analysis of Morrison's chosen methods to represent trauma, the resilience and

strength of the human spirit can be seen, along with the binding power of communal support and unity.

Key words: trauma, literature, race, *Beloved*, *Home*, memory, community, identity

## 9. Reprezentacija traume u djelima Toni Morrison

### Sažetak i ključne riječi

Koncept traume doživio je povećanu popularnost u upotrebi u modernom društvu, zajedno s analitičkim okvirom i terminologijom koja se razvila unutar novo nastalih narativa. Književnost se pokazala kao plodno polje za izražavanje nijansi traumatskog stanja; a postojanje traume unutar rase ostaje bitan aspekt društvenih okolnosti. U djelima Toni Morrison, posebno u romanima *Ljubljena* i *Dom*, velika je važnost dana uspostavljanju narativa koji mogu prikazati traumatične događaje, njihove posljedice i ishode zajedno s preživljavanjima i oživljavanjima koji su ispunjeni nadom. Kroz analizu Morrisonovih odabranih metoda za predstavljanje traume, može se vidjeti otpornost i snaga ljudskog duha, zajedno s obvezujućom snagom zajedničke podrške društva i jedinstva.

Ključne riječi : trauma, književnost, rasa, *Ljubljena*, *Dom*, rememory, društvo, identitet