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Memory, Language and Identity Construction in

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, focusing on how the characters are affected by the cultural trauma of slavery and how memory and language are essential elements that provide resistance to the oppression they face while promoting healing to this collective wound. This research concentrates on the collective aspects of the trauma of slavery, as I discuss how even the characters who did not experience it directly are still affected, losing their sense of identity, and, consequently, becoming alienated, unable to identify with the group and excluded by the community. In this sense, I argue that Morrison uses language to represent how the maintenance of an oral tradition and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) can be forms of resistance to the erasure of black people's narratives, as they become weapons to fight the silencing imposed on them by the dominant society. Additionally, I claim that the rescue of memory through the use of language and cultural manifestations—in the form of stories, songs, myths, rituals and the use of African American Vernacular English—is essential to form bonds that unite black people as a community, restoring the characters' fragmented sense of self as they finally reconcile with both sides of their identity: African and American. In the novels, healing is only possible when they acknowledge their collective memory, accepting their history and understanding their place in the group as they become ready to move forward.

Keywords: Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. *Song of Solomon*. Memory. Language. Healing. Resistance.

RESUMO

Nesta dissertação, analiso os romances *Song of Solomon* e *Beloved*, de Toni Morrison, tendo em foco a maneira como as personagens são afetadas pelo trauma cultural da escravidão e como a memória e a linguagem são elementos essenciais que fornecem resistência à opressão que elas enfrentam enquanto promovem a cura desta ferida coletiva. Esta pesquisa se concentra nos aspectos coletivos do trauma da escravidão, pois discuto como mesmo os personagens que não a vivenciaram diretamente ainda são afetados, perdendo seu senso de identidade e, conseqüentemente, tornando-se alienados, incapazes de se identificar com o grupo e excluídos pela comunidade. Neste sentido, defendo que Morrison usa a linguagem para representar como a manutenção de uma tradição oral e o uso do inglês vernáculo afro-americano podem ser formas de resistência ao apagamento das narrativas dos negros, à medida que se tornam armas para combater o silêncio que lhes é imposto pela sociedade dominante. Além disso, afirmo que o resgate da memória através do uso da linguagem e de manifestações culturais—na forma de histórias, canções, mitos, rituais e do uso do inglês vernáculo afro-americano—é essencial para formar laços que unem os negros como comunidade, restaurando a fragmentação dos personagens quando eles finalmente se reconciliam com ambos os lados de sua identidade: Africano e Americano. Nos romances, a cura só é possível quando eles reconhecem sua memória coletiva, aceitando sua história e compreendendo seu lugar no grupo à medida que se preparam para seguir em frente.

Palavras-chave: Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. *Song of Solomon*. Memória. Linguagem. Cura. Resistência.

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INTRODUCTION

My ancestors were the unwilling, unintact ones: children torn from parents, parents torn from elders, people torn from roots, stories torn from language. Past a certain point, my family's history just... stops. As if there was nothing there.

– N.K. Jemisin, “Dreaming Awake”

As stated in the quote by N.K. Jemisin, African people's story in the United States is marked by oppression, trauma and loss. Being brought to America as slaves, Africans were taken from their land, stripped from their rights and separated from their community, being forced to adapt to a new culture and language. Despite their efforts to resist domination, and, later, to become a part of American society, the black body has always been seen as the “Other”, an outsider, and as a result, African Americans were never accepted as an integral part of the American culture.

The legacy of slavery continued to affect black people after the freedom of slaves with the abolition movement. Charles MacKay, in *Life and Liberty in America: or, Sketches of a Tour in the United States and Canada in 1857-1858* declared that while black men were no longer slaves, whites were not to associate with them, since they were of another race and black men were inferior (240). This statement accurately represents the prevalent feeling of the free North after the emancipation movement, where despite achieving freedom, black people were still perceived as a lesser race, and, therefore, avoided by whites and separated from the dominant society.

The segregation black people endured in the United States can be interpreted as a way for the white colonizers to separate themselves, a conscious necessity for establishing

difference and to depict African American history from the colonizers' point of view, denying the black community a sense of belonging because in the US "American means white" (Morrison, *Playing* 47). Thus, to keep black people invisible and voiceless, Americans allow them only "a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (10). Since "identities are not discovered, but rather actively constructed by individuals" (James 72), the lack of narratives regarding black people's past reinforces the imposition of the white point of view over the black community's experiences, subduing them to a dominant culture. With that, they are not able to connect with their past, as they feel like they have to put their stories and culture aside to fit in with white society. African Americans' speech is, then, delegitimized by the dominant society, and since "cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature" (Morrison, *Playing* 39), they feel disconnected from their identity, as they are unable to narrate and make sense of their past.

Seeing how the silencing of their voices, along with the lack of representation of their struggles in media and art are strategies for the propagation of continuous oppression, it is important to point out how the "rise of the African American novel in the nineteenth century is both a social and a literary phenomenon, important for understanding the boundaries that novelists have confronted and the ways in which these boundaries have been crossed" (Graham 6). Literature has made it possible for African Americans to write themselves into a world that has ignored their existence: it has served to reaffirm their identity through themes like racial confrontation, diaspora and dealing with trauma and heritage in a predominantly white space.

On that aspect, Chloe Anthony Wofford, known as Toni Morrison (1931-2019), tries to represent African American's culture and their struggle in the African diasporas as the main focus of her work as a way to criticize the Eurocentric view that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed by, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old

presence of first Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” (Morrison, *Playing* 4-5). In her works, Morrison makes a conscious effort to present narratives that defy the Western knowledge system which legitimizes racist discourses in order to bring attention to the role of the African American community in shaping the history, the memory and the culture of the United States.

Jan Furman argues that Morrison’s novels are “genuinely representative of the folk”, functioning as “instruments for transmitting cultural knowledge” (*Toni Morrison’s Fiction* 4), while Gay Wilentz calls her an “African storyteller” (*Binding* 82) and K. Zauditu-Selassie states that her novels “represent traditions inspired by a shared spiritual memory” (189). Morrison herself corroborates with this idea when she states that the novel is needed by African Americans because they “don’t live in places where [they] can hear those stories anymore, parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel” (“Rootedness” 340). For her, novels have a function of passing along stories that otherwise would not be heard: they help to preserve her ancestors’ culture and to illustrate their perspective in regards to past events.

In light of this, in this thesis I analyze Morrison’s fiction, specifically her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, highlighting how the rescuing of memory through the use of language and cultural manifestations that encompass all the communicative forms that enable some type of narrative—like songs, myths, rituals and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, formerly known as Black English)—promote forms of resistance, healing and restoration of the characters fragmented identity, ultimately stimulating their reintegration to the community.

Song of Solomon, released in 1977, details the struggles of slave's descendants in depth. It tells the story of Macon "Milkman" Dead III. Milkman is initially presented as a character who is lost, unsure of his identity and who does not belong to his community. He feels distanced from them in two aspects: physically, as his house is on the other side of town, and psychologically, as he is not interested in their history, traditions and ancestors; that is, until he goes South and ends up learning about his family's past and how he shares a culture and stories with a group of people.

In this work, Morrison criticizes those who leave behind their own culture in order to reach the ideals of the whites of America. For the construction of this critique, the author revives the memory of traditional myths of African culture inside a complex picture of American society, showing the difficulty of inserting black people in America and their confrontation with the values imposed on them. The conflict between the old African values and the new urban values is materialized through the portrayal of the African American culture, in the form of myths, songs and traditions, as well as the characters' speech. Equally important, memory is a factor in the formation of the identity of the characters, for they are only in peace with themselves when they are able to know and understand where they came from, considering that the knowledge of their heritage "validates the individual's identity and ensures the survival of the community" (Furman, *Toni Morrison's Song* 18). So, memory and language have a role in depicting the importance of culture and community in *Song of Solomon*.

Also significant for this project, *Beloved*, written in 1987, is a novel that has memory as the central theme. It is set in Ohio, after the American Civil War (1861-65), and it focuses on the relationships between Sethe, her daughter Denver, and the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved. Sethe, a fugitive slave, finds out that her former master discovered her hiding place, and in a moment of panic kills her own baby daughter so she would never have

to experience the traumas of slavery. She intended to kill her other children and then herself so they could finally be free, for in her eyes, death was a better destiny than imprisonment. Her own people stop her before she can go through with the plan, but Sethe's actions leave her and Denver isolated from their community, for they do not approve her actions. They are also initially haunted by the spirit of the baby ghost and, later, by her physical presence, which represents the traumas of a past that they cannot accept. The character of Paul D, who was a slave alongside Sethe in the Sweet Home plantation, is also relevant for this analysis. Like Sethe, he escaped, and, similarly, he has trouble dealing with his traumatic past.

Beloved, then, deals with the psychological impact of slavery by showing its consequences and portraying how the past affects those marked by it. The main characters' battle with the tension between remembering and forgetting traumatic events leads the reader to perceive the importance of understanding the past in order to be free. Moreover, the characters' sense of identity is shaped by their struggles with memory, culture and tradition, as the book shows the historical record of slavery and presents a reflection about its effects and meaning, dealing with a problem of memory, specifically the memory of trauma, both on a personal and collective level. It is personal because it depicts the individual story of Sethe and her family, but it is also collective because this individual memory is the starting point to portray the dilemmas and traumas of the African American community as a whole. The power of the community in the process of healing is, then, highlighted in the novel. Besides that, Baby Suggs, (Sethe's mother-in-law), Sethe, Denver and Beloved represent how the past can affect different generations. Only Baby Suggs and Sethe lived in the plantation as slaves, but this experience affected the next generation in the form of Denver and Beloved, so much that neither of them can move on from what happened in the past, feeling the effects of cultural trauma. Therefore, the analysis of these characters shows the impact of a shared past and the processes of healing and recovery within the context of this novel.

Thus, seeing how the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* struggle with their sense of self, as well as with their collective and individual memories, before discussing their recovery of identity it is necessary to present the motives for its fragmentation. As a starting point of the discussion, it is important to call attention to the fact that “black is an identity which had to be learned” (Hall 45). This makes sense because “the meanings of the categories of identity change and with them the possibilities for thinking the self” (Scott 795); in other words, identity cannot be restricted to a fixed meaning. This concept of identity brings the notion of a collective sense of identity that is still being claimed and constructed amongst the black community. Since “the social and the personal are imbricated in one another and both are historically variable” (795), it is possible to affirm that an individual sense of self is always constructed in relation to the community to which the person belongs. Indeed, “it is not only the *content* of memories, experiences and stories which construct a sense of identity: [the self] is also dependent upon assumptions about the function and process of memory and the kind of access it gives us to the past” (King 2-3). This means that a person can only form a sense of self when in contact with others; identity cannot be constructed in isolation.

Furthermore, the identity conflicts African Americans face as a consequence of historical discrimination are a result of cultural trauma. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines cultural trauma as what “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Regarding African Americans, the trauma in question is slavery: experienced personally or not, bondage left a mark on black people’s psyches, as it altered the way they perceived themselves in relation to others within society. Indeed, slavery is a central part of their

collective memory and shared past, being a crucial element of their sense of self-identification even nowadays, as

insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self.

Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. (Alexander 22)

To better comprehend how to overcome cultural trauma, Saidiya Hartman's debate about the violence of the archive is useful to recognize how African American literary works attempt to speak against the imposed silence of the official records of slavery. Because most slave's stories were not accurately portrayed in the official documents, it is impossible to fully recover them, so these types of narratives tell a history of "what might have been or could have been; it is a history written against the archive" (Hartman 12). But, as Hartman reminds us, "the necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future" (13). This means that the lack of information about the slave's stories that were lost should not be interpreted as a shortcoming to portraying aspects of the African American experience, but as a fuel for possible interpretations of history. Since it is not productive to try to represent the past as faithfully as possible, the aim of these stories becomes creating a space to assure their collective memory will be registered while celebrating an African American identity and culture, preserving their narratives and traditions. The black experiences and the portrayal of an African American identity Morrison constructs in her novels, then, can be considered an act of resistance to the American history of oppression, which tries to control the narratives and the responses to the trauma of slavery.

In the present work, the characters' fragmentation will be analyzed taking into consideration Ron Eyerman's studies relating cultural trauma and the formation of an African American identity, as well as Joy DeGruy's definition of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. These concepts will be useful in both the analysis of characters that experienced servitude and those who did not, but were still affected by it. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead II and Pilate were children of a former slave, and, although they never came in contact with a plantation, they experienced the effects of this oppression, for they were still inserted in a cultural group that was the target of prejudice. Despite belonging to the second generation after the end of slavery, Milkman, Macon Dead's son, is also affected by this cultural trauma, only being able to move on when he rescues the memories and traditions that connected him to his heritage. In *Beloved*, although Denver is part of the first generation after slavery, she and Milkman still have a lot in common, as they represent the future in the novels. As a member of the black community, she experienced the violence of slavery's aftermath, albeit to a lesser extent than her mother and grandmother.

Moreover, with their traumas disregarded and their narratives ignored, black people experience what W. E. B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness". It is important to point out that Du Bois created this concept in 1903, which shows how the identity conflicts inside the black community have been debated for centuries and how there is not a simple resolution.

About the definition of what it meant to be black in America, Du Bois states that

it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

With his concept, Du Bois exposes the main problems that African Americans have when trying to reconcile with their identity in a society dominated by white people. Firstly, double consciousness can be understood as the issue of African Americans being forced to view themselves through white people's perspectives while struggling to maintain their own self definitions. This concerns the powerlessness they feel about the construction of their identity within society. The act of sharing their stories and perspectives, then, can be considered an effort for them to resist this oppression, fighting to take back their narratives and recover their voices. In that way, authors like Morrison contribute to fight the dangers of misrepresentation, making an effort to accurately depict past traumas while still being appreciative of their ancestors' culture and memory.

Secondly, there is the double consciousness created by racism, which excluded black Americans from society, since they are, simultaneously, thought of as being both American and not American. Finally, double consciousness regards the situation of being American and, at the same time, feeling a connection with an African heritage, which creates an internal conflict in the African American individual between what is "African" and what is "American". Through his concept, Du Bois asserted the existence of ambiguities between assimilationist and nationalist tendencies in African American life, seeking a merging of two positive identities (black and American) without the harmful negation from the outside world (Allen Jr. 261). Morrison illustrates this last dilemma with the characters of Macon Dead II and Milkman, as Macon feels the need to distance himself from his African roots in order to assimilate and Milkman, being ignorant about his heritage, feels lost, having no real sense of identity and feeling detached from his community. It is through the figure of Milkman that Morrison shows the possibility of accepting both parts of one's identity in order to deal with this double consciousness: in the end of his journey, Milkman is shown to feel proud of his

identity, fighting to keep his traditions while recognizing that fleeing back to Africa is not the answer since part of himself is also American.

Bearing in mind the concept of “double consciousness”, I argue that Morrison’s idea of a black identity is based on the rescue of African traditions, but it does not ignore the influence America had on its cultural manifestations, merging both of them in order to reach equilibrium to portray the African American subject: a subject that needs to remember his heritage while still considering how he fits in the land he was born, negotiating his identity in between two different cultures. By doing so, Morrison “gives African-American writing an identity of its own that refuses to be restrained into preconceived notions of homogeneity” (Kukreja 29), since she shows representations of the African aspects that influence her writing while illustrating the struggles between preserving those cultural traces and assimilating in the Western society.

Because healing mostly depends on the characters’ ability to recover their past in the form of individual and collective memories, and, in this process, regenerate the bond with the community, my analysis revolves around concepts that put memory in the field of social interaction. For that, Maurice Halbwach’s, Michael Pollak’s and Jan Assmann’s studies about collective memory will be useful, as they highlight memory’s communal aspects and its role in bonding a community through the formation of a common identity. In addition, this research will also embrace the discussion of memory as a means of resistance and healing, since bell hooks explains that it “need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgia longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past. [...] It can serve as a catalyst for self-recovery. We are talking about collective black self-recovery” (40). Hence, memory can serve to enlighten and transform the present, providing some healing to the one who remembers, especially when the memory in question regards issues of cultural trauma. By understanding memory in the sense of a collective

recovery of the past, Morrison is able to question imposed values of the dominant culture while offering an alternative point of view, one that is based on cultural knowledge of African Americans' traditions and heritage.

In this work I also aim to highlight the role of language and community in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Critics agree about the significance of language in Morrison's works. Wilentz calls attention to the fact that Morrison tries to capture the sounds of the village, aiming to reproduce African oral literature: "like the tales of the village storytellers, Morrison's writings are deeply entrenched in her own Black folk roots and the community in which she grew up" (*Binding* 81). Yvonne Atkinson affirms that "the oral tradition of Black English is the foundation of Morrison's work" (12), stating that, in her novels, language does more than just provide communication, it "defines a culture's style and method of looking at life and the individual's place within that culture" (12). Abdellatif Khayati is in accordance with this idea by stating that "Morrison's cultural politics of narrative proposes a rewriting of black experience that can truly represent African Americans—not as the invisible presence of American Africanist texts, but as an active presence that has shaped the choices, the language, and the culture of America" (314). In her books, Morrison values multiple forms of narration, demonstrating how oral tradition offers former slaves the ability to tell their own story and define themselves, as opposed to constantly being defined by slave-owners. These forms of narration not only represent the community's traditions and modes of speaking, but they also have a significant role uniting them around a collective view of a common past.

I argue that memory, language and identity are intertwined in the sense that subjects are constituted through and by discourse. For Joan W. Scott, "since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual" (793). Language supports identity formation because our sense of self is constructed through narratives; we define ourselves in the process of communication with others. It is through a language, by telling people about

our culture, our memories and our lives, or even by performing rituals and songs, that we are defined in a society. Black identity “has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically”, however, “it, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found” (Hall 45). Following this idea, in this thesis I aim to focus on how the portrayal of African American’s culture and their past is essential to form bonds that unite black people as a community, keeping alive their memories as they are represented through the use of language.

In order to do so, in the first chapter I start by explaining how concepts of memory, language and identity intertwine to introduce the characters’ identity issues in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Supported by Eyerman’s and DeGruy’s theories, I showcase how Sethe, Paul D, Denver, Macon Dead II and Milkman are affected by cultural trauma. In addition, I debate how characters who experienced slavery, like Sethe and Paul D, show signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, pointing out how this experience left them fragmented and silenced, incapable of talking about the past. This behavior affected next generations, who, in turn, present symptoms that fit in with DeGruy’s definition of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. I claim that what they all have in common, dealing with cultural trauma, is that they end up feeling lost, without a sense of self and, consequently, are left excluded from the community, unable to identify with the group.

In the second section of chapter one, I explain how, in the novels, language represents a site of resistance to the oppressions African Americans face while also portraying the black experience in the United States. I proceed to show how Morrison tries to capture common experiences shared by African Americans by recovering their collective memories, in an act of resistance to a society that muffles their voices and disregards their stories. She does this while reproducing the way they speak and spread stories, honoring both the oral tradition and the use of African American Vernacular English in her narratives. To illustrate this, I discuss

the tension between oral speeches and the written word in the novels, arguing that the written record is always a source of misrepresentation in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. For instance, Macon Dead's real name was Jake, but a drunk worker at the Freedmen's Bureau accidentally renamed him by filling the wrong spaces in his form. Although he accepted this new name, this occurrence proves once again how black people were always defined by whites, having no say in the matter of their own name or identity. This situation happens to Sethe as well: in the newspaper article that registers Beloved's murder, Sethe is portrayed as white people see her. The context, Sethe's motivations and the details that drove her to this action are left out of the piece, her narrative and point of view ignored. Taking that in consideration, I present the argument that, in the novels, the oral speech is the one that can be trusted, carrying the group's collective memory. It is by telling Paul D about the infanticide that Sethe is able to speak freely, exposing her feelings and passing along her side of the story, fighting the exclusion and the erasure of her version in the official record. Additionally, the oral form is also used to preserve the memory of their ancestry, such as the song and the myth that tell the story about Milkman's family history, furthering the notion they can fight other people's version of their narrative through the oral tradition, keeping their collective memory alive. The use of AAVE complements the notion of language being used as a site of resistance, since it is a form of expression that counterposes the act of speaking the forced Standard English. The effort to emulate the oral speech with the use of the African American Vernacular English defines their form of communication while indicating how the characters share a culture and a history, connecting them to their collective identity.

In chapter two, I focus on the healing process and how it ultimately promotes the reunion of the fragmented subject with the community, restoring communication. In *Beloved's* case, healing is achieved by performing rituals and the act of sharing personal stories. The rituals analyzed are Baby Suggs's preaching in the Clearances and Beloved's

exorcism. In her sermons, Baby Suggs assumes her role as a guide, encouraging the group to deal with their trauma by laughing, dancing and crying, in an act of sharing that unites them as a group. Her speeches aim to recover self-esteem by promoting self-love and communal bonding. The act of sharing personal stories can be considered a step towards healing. Because of that, Sethe is able to recover memories she forgot she had, memories that remind her where she came from. These reminiscences are essential for Sethe to regain a sense of self, and for Denver to understand her, bringing them closer together. However, she later becomes stuck in the past, consumed by her grief for Beloved, unable to move on and look forward. Her situation motivates Denver to go ask for help, sharing their story with the group. This ultimately results in Beloved's exorcism, the final act responsible for mending the broken bond between the women of 124 and the community, making it possible for them to finally begin to move on. *Song of Solomon*, in turn, portrays the healing process by using cultural manifestations such as songs and myths to portray the discovery of family history. To explain Milkman's troubles with double consciousness, his relationships with his father, Macon Dead II, and his aunt, Pilate Dead, are examined to explain processes of assimilation and resistance to the dominant culture. The debate is centered around Milkman's transformation after he starts to interact with other members of the African American community and learns about his African heritage. In Milkman's journey of figuring out his origins, he ends up closer to his community, finally valuing their connection.

The second part of the chapter is focused on the relations between the past and the future. An analysis of the relation between the characters who represent the ancestor figure and the next generation will be presented to discuss the process in which the younger ones discovered their communal identity and how they were able to find balance between their African heritage and their American nationality. Their acquired knowledge about their culture

and collective memory allowed them to find a place in their community, bringing a message of hope for the descendants to come.

With all that said, through the analysis of how memory and language are crucial to connect the characters with their African American identity in the works in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, in this research I suggest that only the characters that come to know and accept their past (both individual and collective) and embrace their African American culture and community are able to overcome their traumas and attempt to move forward, while those who deny their past and abandon their traditions are unable to reach equilibrium and end up lost. Lastly, it is important to highlight that though Morrison presents the conflicts African Americans deal with, her novels “need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 341). Thus, her works cannot be considered formulas to solve them, and although memory and language are not the only features that contribute to shape someone’s identity, in the universe of the books they seem to be the main aspects that enable the characters to connect with their history and tradition, as the characters solve their identity conflicts based on how they accept (or not) their heritage, showing how the past affects those marked by it and the importance of understanding it in order to be free.

CHAPTER ONE

Memory, Language and Collective and Individual Trauma

One can only go for so long without asking ‘who am I?’, ‘where do I come from?’, ‘what does all this mean?’, ‘what is being?’, ‘what came before me and what might come after?’. Without answers there is only a hole. A hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless longing. We are cavities.
 – Rivers Solomon et al, *The Deep*

Introduction

In *The Deep*, the history of the Atlantic slave trade and the murder of enslaved women thrown overboard is reframed as an allegory for generational trauma in the form of a mermaid folktale. The novella approaches recurrent themes present in African American novels: history, trauma, and, most significantly, the importance of sharing memories in the process of healing and belonging. The questions posed in this epigraph illustrate the need of knowing not only an individual past, but also a collective one, a past that explains the origins of one’s people and helps them to see possibilities for their future. This need is also explored in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Similarly, both novels showcase an idea of unity and healing through the sharing of pain in the form of a collective memory. The longing for connection with people who have the same background, the necessity to situate oneself in history and the emptiness the characters feel with the erasing of the past are all dealt with in the two novels, since, alongside the trauma of slavery, the character’s memories and cultural context are also fundamental in the formation of their identity.

About this subject, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes that “strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory” (67). The author justifies this

statement by explaining that “all memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened (...)” (67-68). While it is true that memories are individual in the sense that no one can experience an occurrence exactly in the same way, Sontag agrees that they can be narrated and passed along, transmitted to next generations in order to preserve events that are part of a cultural identity of a group.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, "while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (22), which shows how both authors appreciate the value of individual memory to the extent that it allows the maintenance of a collective one. Halbwachs also presents the idea that socialization, rather than genetic evolution, is what makes individuals sense that they belong to certain groups inside society, dismissing the notion that memory can be biologically “inheritable” and defending the need to share it in order to be able to preserve these groups by keeping their culture alive through generations. Memory, once again, is not only considered as a factor to strengthen bonds of different communities: it is also a way for them to preserve their cultural inheritance, as well as their identity as a group.

In “Memória e Identidade Social”, Michael Pollak discusses the elements that constitute memory, along with its characteristics. He states that memories are formed by events personally experienced, by events experienced by the group (where a person feels identification with a given past, even if they did not experience it themselves), by the people and characters in the events, and, finally, by the places (both the ones a person has been to and the ones outside of the space-time of a person’s life, but that are important to the maintenance of the story of the community) (201-202). Pollak agrees with Halbwachs when he states that memory must be understood as a phenomenon that is collectively constructed and subjected to transformations and changes, since people construct the image of themselves

and of their own groups based on the organization, the maintenance and the coherence of these memories, as they become part of the person's own essence. The construction of identity is a phenomenon that is done through direct negotiation with others, and, as such, it must not be understood as unchanging elements of a person or a group, as they can evolve based on how the memory is recalled by different people (204).

Based on that, one can understand that memory plays a role in shaping identities, as it is what preserves the history and culture of any group of people. The conservation of memory is made through language, be it oral or written, because “how we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others, is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past” (Suleiman 1). Memory is, then, represented through language because it “needs a place, a context. Its place, if it finds one that lives beyond a single generation, is to be found in the stories that we tell” (Kenny 421). More than only in stories, memories live in any form of language or cultural manifestation that carries meaning, whether they are songs, myths, a person’s name or even their way of speaking.

In Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, characters like Macon Dead II, Milkman, Sethe, Paul D and Denver have a sense of fragmentation and displacement in regards to their identity, as they struggle to find their place within their community. In Macon, Sethe and Paul D, this sense of isolation is caused by their urge to forget a traumatic past, which culminates in a resistance to preserve their story, followed by a disregard to individual and collective memories that are part of their African American identity. However, in Milkman and Denver’s case, the alienation from the community happens due to a lack of knowledge of their family’s history, which highlights the consequences of not passing along stories to the next generations.

In the novels, the ways that they deal with this distancing from the community differs; for instance, Macon's reaction to it is opposite from his sister Pilate: while he desperately makes an effort to fit in with the white people by assimilating, she refuses to let go of her history and culture, taking a place at the outskirts of the city, isolated from white interference. Sethe, like Macon, makes an active effort to forget her past and refuses to talk about it; however, haunted by her memories, she does not show any desire to assimilate, ending up at the margins both from the white and the black societies. Yet, while their reactions to this isolation are different, the origin of these problems is the same: the trauma of slavery. Whether experienced personally by the characters or not, slavery is a central point in both novels, as it is the trauma that triggers the characters' issues with their identities and also accentuates their sense of displacement.

Thus, in this chapter, I present concepts of collective and individual memory to demonstrate how Morrison uses personal narratives in order to preserve the collective history of black people in America, in a process of historical revision. From there, I will discuss the concepts of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, coined by Joy DeGruy, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to explain the consequences of slavery within the black population of the United States and how they created a silenced and fragmented subject who is disconnected from his or her environment. Additionally, this problem will be addressed in accordance to Ron Eyerman's theory relating cultural trauma and the formation of an African American identity. I will also point out the representation of forgetting and remembering as a consequence of trauma and as a form of healing, respectively, for it becomes explicit in Sethe's usage of words like "rememory" and "disremember" and in the rescue of shared memories through language.

Moreover, the importance Morrison gives to language and its power of resistance and preservation of cultural values is also highlighted in this chapter. To better understand how

language can be used as a form of oppression and domination, as well as a site of resistance, and through the idea of the links between communicative and cultural memory and language, I will show how the author values the sound of oral discourse—be it in the forms of narratives, names or the use of African American Vernacular English—in opposition to the written one. There are numerous occasions in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* when the tension between oral and written appears, with the oral being treated as a way to becoming close to traditions and history, resulting in discovery and reconciliation with an oppressive past, while the written poses a danger to the black people in the novels, as it is often connected with misrepresentations of the subjects.

1.1 Memory, Fragmentation and Discourse: Intersections

Inspired by Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, which highlights the social aspects of memory, Jan Assmann introduces the concepts of communicative memory and cultural memory. The author establishes these terms in an attempt to relate memory, culture and society to each other ("Collective" 129). Although Assmann mostly agrees with Halbwachs's concept, he opposes the sociologist's view that collective memory has to be kept apart from the realm of culture. He argues that, for Halbwachs, once memory is objectivized (whether it is in the form of texts, images, rites, buildings or monuments), its contemporary reference will eventually get lost in a process of transformation from "memory" to "history" ("Collective" 128). Assmann, however, believes that traditions and objectivized culture are structured like memories, defending this consideration by pointing out that a group bases its notion of unity from these cultural manifestations, "which allow the group to reproduce its identity" ("Collective" 128). His solution for this conflict is not to replace Halbwachs idea of collective memory, but, instead, to distinguish between ways of

remembering by creating the concepts of communicative and cultural memory (“Communicative” 110).

While both of them are forms of collective memory, Assmann claims that communicative memory “includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications” (“Collective” 126). As such, communicative memories are associated with oral traditions, since they are constituted in direct interactions with members of one’s group and have a “limited temporal horizon” (127), being preserved for a maximum of one hundred years in the past, which is equivalent to “three or four generations” (127). Communicative forms of memory can be seen in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, since the books portray oral traditions being passed along from generation to generation. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver, as well as Beloved, represent these different generations. In *Song of Solomon*, Jake, Macon Dead, Pilate and Milkman fulfill that role.

Cultural memory, in comparison, “is a form of collective memory in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity” (Assmann, “Communicative” 110). Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory has fixed points, which are maintained “through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)” (Assmann, “Collective” 129). This shows how cultural memory has a capacity to reconstruct the past, since it is cultivated by people, who are then able to perceive past in a way that relates to the current times they are living (130). As such, the past is not “preserved”, as no memory is able to preserve the past, but it is “cast in symbols as they are represented in oral myths or in writings, performed in feasts, and as they are continually illuminating a changing present” (Assmann, “Communicative” 111). This cultivation has a purpose to “stabilize and convey that society’s self-image” (Assmann, “Collective” 132), giving each group an idea of

unity, as well as particularity. This work will also analyze cases where cultural memory emerges in the novels, be it through the flying African myth, in the case of *Song of Solomon*, or in the ritual performed by Baby Suggs at the Clearance in *Beloved*, which will be better explored in the next chapter.

The damage done to the preservation of cultural memory, called cultural trauma, is one of the main identity issues black people face nowadays. As an effort to further understand the impacts of cultural trauma, Kai T. Erikson distinguishes individual and collective trauma, defining that the former is “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (153), while the latter is

a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (153-54)

It is only natural, then, that “as cultural process, trauma is linked to the formation of collective identity and the construction of collective memory” (Eyerman, “Cultural” 60) because, like previously stated, it is the result of a disruption that penetrates the core of a collective sense of identity, making the group feel disoriented and unable to redefine their sense of self. Therefore, in this aspect, a person does not have to have a direct experience of the event that caused that cultural trauma, but they have to be inserted in the group or community that experienced its effects in order to relate to it, for it to be a part of their

collective identity, functioning almost like an “inherited memory”—not in the sense of genetics, but in the sense that it is passed amongst its members (Pollak 204).

In regards to the cultural trauma caused by slavery, Joy DeGruy has termed the condition “related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression” (14) as “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” or PTSS. PTSS, then, describes the multigenerational trauma experienced by African Americans, as well as the racial violence and discrimination they are subjected to since the period of slavery until present times, for instance, with cases of police brutality that repeatedly cause the deaths of African American citizens in the US. In this sense, it is important to reinforce how “it was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that rounded African American identity” (Eyerman, “Cultural” 60). Hence, the loss of identity caused by the collective trauma of African American history in the US could potentially be repaired by African American people using the source of their trauma, slavery, as a tie that unites them to achieve cohesion inside the group.

Through her writings, Morrison contributes to the remembering and the establishment of an African American identity, since, according to Werner Sollors, literature has been important in “sustaining feelings of belonging” among those who are separated “by national and linguistic boundaries” (289). About the formation of identity, Eyerman states that

Collective identity refers to a process of “we” formation, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history. While this reconstructed common and collective past may have its origins in direct experience, its recollection is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent the past in the present. (*Cultural* 14)

By stating that the recollection of experience is mediated through narratives, Eyerman calls attention to how memory and language are intertwined in the process of construction of identity. In that case, the remembrance is only made possible because of language, as the acts of remembering and narrating are mediated through and by language (Kessel 4). Thus, “while the arrangement of material artifacts may evoke a ‘sense of the past’ (...) what exactly this ‘sense’ is requires articulation through language” (Eyerman, *Cultural* 9), meaning that cultural artifacts can evoke memories, but one needs language to shape these memories and express them to the group. On the same note, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon defines the power of language, presenting the assertion that “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (9): for him, the ability to speak a language is a possibility to take on a world and a culture. Memory, along with language, is an extremely important factor in the feeling of continuity and coherence of a person or group in their reconstruction of themselves (Eyerman, *Cultural* 5), producing a feeling of collective identity that frequently precedes, accompanies or succeeds moments of crisis.

1.1.1 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: Silence, Fragmentation, and the Loss of Identity

Unlike the case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD, which, according to the American Psychiatric Association in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, can be caused by “directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; or experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)” (434), there is an added racial element that gives rise to PTSS. Thus, cases of internalized racism and the continuous oppression of society can be

contributing factors to cases of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Additionally, differently from PTSD, in the case of PTSS, the trauma of slavery has a collective aspect to it: since it is a consequence of cultural trauma, one does not need to have experienced it or to personally know someone that has lived through this period to feel its consequences, as “the effects of this trauma and dehumanization are observable today” (DeGruy 38). For instance, when Morrison writes novels that discuss discrimination in America, showcasing slavery as a central theme, she does not need to have experienced it in order to be affected by it: as she affirms, she “felt *familiar* with slavery and overwhelmed by it” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction”). Her need to “translate the historical into the personal” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction”) illustrates how this event still resonates with African Americans today, as they feel the need to preserve the memory of their community, making an effort to “figure out what it was about slavery that made it so repugnant, so personal, so indifferent, so intimate, and yet so public” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction”). Her novels, then, can work as an act of remembrance.

As an individual experience, it is important to point out how slaves have also experienced many of the stressors associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, such as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (*Diagnostic* 434). Considering that “the disorder may be especially severe or long-lasting when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional (e.g., torture, sexual violence)” (439), this lifetime of trauma likely caused a considerable number of slaves to have exhibited symptoms of PTSD.

Morrison represents these cases in *Beloved*, with Sethe and Paul D, who have directly experienced slavery, being subjected to unimaginable violence and humiliation. Some of the symptoms of PTSD can include “avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s)” (*Diagnostic* 434-435), as well as “recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s); dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or

acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring and persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself” (435). This resulted in both of them closing up and avoiding to talk about the horrors of their past and in the violent act of Sethe killing her own daughter, Beloved, to protect the baby from going through the same trauma, which fits with the symptom of “exaggerated startle response” (435), recurrent in people with PTSD.

Sethe and Paul D suffered physical and psychological aggressions while living in Sweet Home: they were exploited, beaten up, and compared to animals numerous times, shown in *Beloved* when schoolteacher’s nephews were taking notes about Sethe and are told by him to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (Morrison 193) and when he compares Sethe’s escape and wildness to an animal’s, asking his nephew “what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education” (149).

Throughout her life in Sweet Home, Sethe was raped and often treated like an animal, her most traumatic event being when schoolteacher’s nephews used cowhide on her and took her milk (17), leaving her powerless and violating her bond with her children, who are the only ones she sees as pure and has allowed herself to love. Morrison explains that “the necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt to confirm one’s own self as normal” (*Origin* 29). By urging to distinguish those who belong to the human race and those who do not, “the Black subject turns into the intrusive enemy, who has to be controlled; the *white* subject becomes the sympathetic victim, who is forced to control” (Kilomba 18). Thus, whites are in charge of determining how black people should be perceived, associating them with negative aspects that they do not want to see in themselves. As “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (Morrison, *Beloved* 190), the black subject becomes the representation of the characteristics that whites do not want to be linked with. In this case, the need of the beating, in the slave owner’s mind, is justified by the need to control and domesticate the slaves, and, as such, it is their fault, resulting in a sense of

blame for their own condition. All these negative thoughts about oneself and the past caused Sethe to struggle with her memories, as she “worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (6). Try as she might, Sethe could not forget the violence she was subjected to in the past, because “unfortunately her brain was devious” (6) and she often felt shame about her inability to forget.

Sethe’s battle with her memories are also represented by her use of the words “rememory” and “disremember”. When Sethe talks about her past memories, they are so powerful that she feels like she is in those places again, hurting in the same way, and that is why she names them “rememories”, as she is not only remembering, but also re-living it: “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do” (35-36). Because of the power of the trauma, the memories come to Sethe in fragments, as the pain does not allow her to remember them all at once. J. Brooks Bouson’s statement that Sethe’s “rememory” refers to “her uncontrolled remembering and relieving of emotionally painful experiences” (135) supports this interpretation, as for Sethe, the past has left such a mark on her that not only she is not able to forget, but it leaves her unable to speak about it. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s fragmented memories that are presented throughout the book show that the continuity of the past, in Sethe’s mind, is lost, as she recovers them little by little.

The trauma also causes her to forever fear that what happened to her will repeat with next generations, as when she warns Denver: “if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (*Beloved* 36). Sethe, in a display of desperation when she sees schoolteacher, her former slave master (who planned to take her back to Sweet Home), ends up killing her baby daughter, Beloved. She also intended to kill her other children and then herself in order to protect them and never return to the violence she endured there. For her, “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s

characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused—and refused still” (251). Years later, Sethe is still terrified at the thought of what happened to her happening to her kids despite the fact that she admits that by this point Sweet Home is no longer there, “because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what” (36). Although Sethe had the intention of protecting her children, because of the extreme response that resulted in the death of Beloved, she passed the trauma onto Denver, as right after that fact “Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (152), which forever bonded her with this event. In consequence of this, Sethe gets arrested and is excluded by the black community, who did not approve her doings.

Also, the use of “disremember”, as opposed to forget, indicates something that an individual tries to control. While forgetting is natural, “disremember” carries the connotation of an effort not to remember. That is what Sethe attempts to do with her past traumas: she actively seeks to forget them, willing herself not to remember, although she cannot succeed, as “[Sethe's] brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (70). This passage indicates how the struggles with the past and memories are a part of Sethe’s identity, as she cannot leave them behind and move on. The way the book is narrated, in the present with numerous flashes of a traumatic past interfering with Sethe’s state of mind, translates how Sethe feels unable to fight her memories. Although actively trying, she fails to repress the past, always associating it with events from the present, but still, she refuses to talk about it, as Denver tells her: “You never told me all what happened” (36).

All these efforts to forget show how Sethe is affected by symptoms of PTSD, which render her silent and fragmented, alienated from the community, presenting “diminished

interest or participation in significant activities and feelings of detachment or estrangement from others” (*Diagnostic* 435). This isolation from the people in her group is caused by Sethe’s inability to communicate and, thus, to identify with them, since she is repressing not only her individual memories, but her language and the cultural aspects that she has in common with them, as she feels that she is not able to process what happened, and, as a consequence, she cannot talk about it. As Sethe remembers her past in fragments, she herself becomes a fragmented subject: by disrupting her story, she is disconnected from her present.

Paul D is also shown to be silenced, and, because of that, he is made to feel inferior than an animal. In the scene, Paul D is wearing a bit, which was “placed inside the mouth of the Black subject, clamped between the tongue and the jaw, and fixed behind the head with two strings, one surrounding the chin and the other surrounding the nose and forehead” (Kilomba 16). Grada Kilomba describes the bit as a “*mask of speechlessness*” (16), stating that “its primary function was to implement a sense of speechlessness and fear, inasmuch as the mouth was a place of both muteness and torture” (16). In her novel, Morrison chooses not to describe the bit, but to focus on Paul D’s sentiments while wearing it, as, for her, “the reader didn’t need to *see* it so much as *feel* what it was like” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction”). She evokes this feeling in the smallest details, for example, when Paul D is wearing it while staring at Mister, a rooster that inhabited Sweet Home. It is valid to point out that a rooster is named Mister, a title that suggests that it is treated with more respect than the slaves. While feeling the taste of iron in his mouth, trying to process what happened to his friends, Paul D sees Mister sitting at the tub and smiling at him. Paul D compares the tub to a throne, revealing how in that moment he felt that a rooster was hierarchically superior to him: “Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn’t even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was...” (*Beloved* 72). Paul D’s feeling of inferiority is explained by the fact that the rooster was allowed to be unaltered by the events

that happened to him in Sweet Home, while Paul D could not, not after he realized a rooster had more power and freedom than himself: “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. (...) But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). According to Morrison, Paul D “felt cheapened and lessened and that he would never be worth as much as a rooster sitting on a tub in the sunlight” (Morrison, “Art of Fiction”). Even talking about this realization with Sethe years later made him uncomfortable, “for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him” (*Beloved* 73). Paul D’s forced silence in the past made room for another one in his present; he could not talk about it even after the bit was out of his mouth. He was no longer physically restrained, and still the experience took away a part of his voice, as he could not communicate to others what had happened to him, and he was left feeling shame for an occurrence that was not his fault.

Events like these play a part in altering the character’s impressions of themselves and reshaping how they perceive reality, molding part of their identity and resulting in a lack of self-awareness, as stated by Sethe, “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 couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (251). With slavery, black people were made to see themselves as inferior because that is how they were treated by white people, who explored them and muffled their voices, figuratively by ignoring them, and, with the use of the bit, literally.

Morrison brings attention to the feelings of slaves, ignored by “official” records of history as she states that this kind of information is only found between the lines of history, “it sort of falls off the page, or it’s a glance and a reference. It’s right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names”

(Morrison, "Art of Fiction"). Morrison strives to give her characters a face, a voice, a connection to the reader in the present by giving them a personal quality. The situations they experience, then, are designed not only to illustrate the mistreatments that happened with slaves, but so that the violence of the past is no longer abstract once the reader can connect with the characters and imagine the horrors people like them experienced in reality.

In Paul D's case, silence was used as a weapon for control that "centers on the reduction of the colonized peoples of the Americas to the status of nonhuman and the concomitant dismissal of their languages and ways of knowing as the simple expressions of their 'nature' as 'inferior beings'" (Veronelli 408). By rendering him speechless, the slave master not only stripped him of his language, but also of his ability to communicate (in his present and, in some level, in his future because of the trauma), causing his isolation, as it is through language that he could relate to others who have experienced the same oppression. This act can be considered as "a process of dehumanization through racialization at the level of communication" (Veronelli 408): being unable to talk about it, Paul D could not overcome his trauma.

Also, schoolteacher retains his power by silencing Paul D, as he denies the slave the communicative ability of the master and puts him in an inferior level, closing the possibility of a dialogue between them, but also between the slaves themselves. Although Baby Suggs did not endure the violence of the bit, in her bondage years she "talked as little as she could get away with because what was there to say that the roots of her tongue could manage?" (*Beloved* 141). She was silent because she could not say what she wanted and she knew that she could get punished for saying the wrong thing. Silence was used as a form of control because it prevented the slaves from grouping together to share traumatic experiences that would allow them to heal and to resist domination. Baby Suggs found her voice again once she was free, performing rituals for the community. However, she lost it again after she was

excluded by her group, retrieving to her bed and saying nothing anymore, which shows how silence can be traumatic.

It is possible to notice how this situation affected Paul D, as he revisits the animal allusion later in the novel, talking to Sethe when they are discussing the subject of Beloved's killing. Paul D argues that what Sethe did was wrong and that murder was not the answer, as "There could have been a way. Some other way" (165). When Sethe replies asking what way, Paul D answers "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). With that, Paul D replicates the dehumanization he experienced by comparing Sethe's attitude to an animal's. He later blames himself for the comparison, as he is aware that he and Sethe experienced the same kind of humiliation and that his words have an impact on her, bringing back unpleasant memories: "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his coldhouse secret straight to her too-thick love" (165).

However, that does not mean that Sethe and Paul D are completely incapable of talking about their past. Upon their reencounter, they talk about shared memories of Sweet Home. Initially, though, they only highlight the good, putting aside the bad in an effort to forget the horrors they experienced. Denver is exasperated by that, asking "how come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (13). After that outburst, Sethe and Paul D face reality and talk about the bad memories, showing that they cannot ignore them for long. It is no coincidence that the ghost of Beloved makes its first appearance in the novel when Paul D is discovering Sethe's scars—physical scars, in the form of the chokecherry tree in her back, as well as psychological scars, as she tells him the story of schoolteacher's nephews taking her milk. In this instance, both are haunted by memories, figuratively, with their reminiscences, and literally, with the apparition of the ghost. The pain and the dehumanization stayed with the slaves even after they were free, lingering and being passed along to the next generations,

which would later result in a collective trauma shared by the members of the black community, as a sense of inferiority is also one of the consequences of PTSS.

On the collective aspect of the memory of slavery, Joy DeGruy argues that black subjects experience a legacy of trauma (62). According to her,

in addition to the family, the legacy of trauma is also passed down through the community. During slavery, the black community was a suppressed and marginalized group. Today, the African American community is made up of individuals and families who collectively share differential anxiety and adaptive survival behaviors passed down from prior generations of African Americans, many of whom likely suffered from PTSD. The community serves to reinforce both the positive and negative behaviors through the socialization process. (63)

Being isolated from the community interrupts this socialization process, causing a lack of self-knowledge that can eventually lead to the destruction of some people's sense of identity and remove them of their social roles. Additionally, because of PTSS, they can experience symptoms such as vacant esteem, ever present anger and racist socialization (64). Some manifestations of these cases can be seen in the characters Macon Dead II and Milkman, in *Song of Solomon*, and Denver, in *Beloved*.

1.1.2 Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and Generational Legacies

In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead II believes that by owning things he can own himself and other people, and he is shown to represent the cultural values of the West. In the novel, his family exemplifies “the patriarchal, nuclear family that has been traditionally a stable and critical feature not only of American society, but of Western civilization in general” (Smith 34). Macon, then, associates material things with the construction of his

identity. His place in society and his understanding of himself are dictated by the pursuit of wealth, not by his relationships with his community: “To Milkman’s father, college was time spent in idleness, far away from the business of life, which was learning to own things” (Morrison, *Song* 68). Macon’s greatest advice for his son Milkman is to “own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (56), which shows how Macon tries to disassociate from the African American community, severing ties with them, as he sees them as inferior. He actively ignores the values passed onto him by his father and focuses only on the individual, denying the “collective nature of human identity” (Smith 30). His dismissal for the people from his own community is an example of racist socialization, as he is shown to adopt “the slave master’s value system” (DeGruy 70). This means that Macon believes that all that is associated with whiteness is superior, and all that is associated with blackness, inferior. While his avoidance of his sister, Pilate, can be explained by his eagerness to avoid the past, it can also be interpreted as a way to not be associated with his blackness, as “he fears that the white bankers will cease to trust him if they associate him with a woman bootlegger” (Smith 34).

Macon Dead II is so desperate to assimilate that he becomes alienated from his community, always prioritizing his profits. His lack of empathy and his Western individualist values are clear in moments such as when he gives an ultimatum to Mrs. Bains, the grandmother of his son’s best friend, when she cannot afford to pay her rent: “Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That’s where they gonna be if you don’t figure out some way to get me my money” (*Song* 27). These feelings of separateness and distrust cause his alienation from the community and his fragmentation as a subject who cannot deal with his double consciousness: he does not feel completely American, as his blackness denies him the sense of incorporation in white society, nor does he feel African, as he denies this part of his identity in an effort to fit in. Macon goes as far as marrying Ruth, a light-skinned black

woman, “perhaps in hopes of escaping the stigma he had associated with being black” (DeGruy 70). Still, knowing that he cannot become white, no matter how much he incorporates their values, he also presents a vacant esteem as the consequence of seeing himself through their eyes, sensing his inferiority and powerlessness in moments of remembrance of his father’s murder by white subjects who wanted his property. This frustration results in an ever-present anger, as “anger can be both a response to the frustration of blocked goals and the fear of failure” (DeGruy 68). In Macon’s case, the blocked goal is fitting in with the white part of society, and his fear of failure is linked to the distress when he thinks about the possibility of losing his property, like his father. This is why he is so attached to material objects, since “he paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess” (*Song* 265). He does not want to make the same mistakes as his father, who left his kids with nothing after white people took what was his and he could not do anything about it. Instead of becoming angry with the whites, he envies their power to do what they want without consequences, as he knows that his rage towards them will bore him no results.

According to DeGruy, “when the true target of a person’s feelings is deemed to be out of reach, the person will take their feelings out on safer targets” (69). That is why Macon redirects his anger towards his family and community, especially Ruth. He brutalizes and offends his wife on a regular basis, even hitting her in some instances: “Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her” (*Song* 18); “his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it” (18). Macon also distrusts Pilate, telling Milkman to stay away from her and stating: “That woman’s no good. She’s a snake, and can charm you like a snake,

but still a snake” (55). About Pilate, he thinks that “at one time she had been the dearest thing in the world to him. Now she was odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt. A regular source of embarrassment, if he would allow it. But he would not allow it” (26). Macon’s perception of Pilate is associated with the way he sees the past: once it was a time he thought was precious, but after his trauma, after his father was murdered, his memories became tainted and a source of humiliation to him.

Additionally, due to his complex feelings about his past, Macon shuts down and mostly refuses to talk about it with his family. Believing that the significance of his identity lies in the future, he does not share his traditions, his memories or his stories with his children. Not only that, but he also tries to separate Milkman from Pilate, who, in the novel, represents the figure of the ancestor. This results in a sense of detachment from the community, passed along to his offspring, who feel no connection to their group whatsoever. In that case, the lack of traditions passed from one generation to another causes the loss of “the continuity of the past (...) what you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation” (Arendt 212). Macon sees the past as something without a common thread with his present, and, in return, his children do not know about their origins, losing the connection with their heritage.

Valerie Smith explains Macon’s relationship with time by stating that

Macon predicates his behavior on a linear conception of time. To his mind, future successes determine identity and justify one’s actions in the past and in the present. Macon’s futuristic, linear vision of time and of identity is displayed by his failure to consider his past as a part of himself. He denies the importance of his relationship with his sister and of their shared past. Moreover, as he remarks while telling

Milkman about his days in Lincoln's Heaven, he does not even allow himself to think about his past. (36)

As a result, Milkman did not even know that his grandfather was a slave, oblivious to his family's history: "Your father was a slave? / What kind of foolish question is that? Course he was. Who hadn't been in 1869?" (*Song* 54). It is only when Milkman goes South and hears his father's childhood stories told by the people of his old community that he begins to understand Macon: "He could not recognize that stern, greedy, unloving man in the boy they talked about, but he loved the boy they described" (209). This further proves the point that Macon has become a fragmented subject, the past and the present do not fit together for him and his own child does not recognize him in the stories of the past, as he hid this part of his life from Milkman, only caring about passing along the pursuit for status and values of greediness.

The hatred and dismissal for members of the family is also initially passed along to Milkman. Before he travels South, Milkman is portrayed to be selfish and shown to only care about himself. He feels superior to the people of the community, exhibiting signs of a racist socialization, as he undervalues them. Although he tries to protect Ruth from his father, he still thought of her in degrading ways, even stating that "never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own" (72). In instances when he protected Ruth, it was not because he cared about her, since "he would not pretend that it was love for his mother. She was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love. But it was her vaporishness that made her more needful of defense" (72). As for the rest of his family, initially he seemed intrigued by Pilate, and, in his childhood, he looked forward to go to her house and hear her stories, being described as "spellbound" (39). In his earlier years, Milkman thought Hagar, his cousin, "was, it seemed to him, as pretty a girl as he'd ever seen" (47). However, influenced by Macon, when Milkman gets older, he loses the

admiration for all members of his family, getting tired of Hagar and taunting her after he got to be with her, thinking of them as “strange motherfuckers” (73) and describing Pilate’s side of the family as a “really strange bunch. His whole family was a bunch of crazies. Pilate singing all day and talking off the wall. Reba turning on for everything in pants. And Hagar...well, she was just fine, but still, she wasn’t regular. She had some queer ways. But at least they were fun and not full of secrets” (73). His disrespect towards his family could lead back to Macon’s teachings, which incite greed and selfish behavior. Milkman did not feel bad even when he tried to steal gold from Pilate, an act encouraged by his father, which demonstrates an incredibly individualistic way of thinking and a lack of empathy with the collective.

This shows how Milkman was disconnected from his family and the African values: he felt detached from them, and, thus, detached from his history, from his heritage. When Macon decided to share a story about his past with Ruth, explaining the origin of his hatred for her, Milkman “felt curiously disassociated from all that he had heard. As though a stranger that he’d sat down next to on a park bench had turned to him and begun to relate some intimacy (...) he himself was not involved or in any way threatened by the stranger’s story” (72). Milkman did not want to understand. Instead of caring, he gets angry with Macon, berating him. His dismissal for anything that did not involve himself in other people’s past is obvious: ““What the fuck did he tell me all that shit for?’ He didn’t want to know any of it. There was nothing he could do about it. The doctor was dead. You can’t do the past over” (73). Disinterested by the family’s history and deeming that “he was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all” (102), Milkman was living “without identity” (Lubiano 110). His fragmented notion of the past created a fragmented subject. Living in the North, before his

journey, Milkman did not know his place in society, feeling uncomfortable and disinterested anywhere he went.

In *Beloved*, Denver exhibits this same pattern of behavior, initially unconcerned about the cruelty and violence her mother endured in the past, only caring about tales that relate to her, like her birth story: “Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself (...) Not being in it, she hated it” (*Beloved* 62); “This was the part of the story she loved. She was coming to it now, and she loved it because it was all about herself” (77). Isolated from the community, until *Beloved*’s arrival, Denver’s days were filled with loneliness. This fact is highlighted in various instances throughout the novel, such as: “Hot, shy, now Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother—serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing” (12); “Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out*” (28-29); “Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big, thinking everybody had somebody but her; thinking even a ghost’s company was denied her” (104).

Denver’s loneliness can be traced back to her childhood. Suffering the consequences of her mother’s actions, the girl was also excluded by her group, although she did not notice it at first. When she was a kid, Denver started frequenting lessons in Lady Jones’s house with the other children of the community, and “she was so happy she didn’t even know she was being avoided by her classmates—that they made excuses and altered their pace not to walk with her” (102). That was until a boy in her class, Nelson Lord, asked a question that put a stop to her interacting with other people outside of her house: “‘Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?’ It was the second question that made it impossible for so long to ask Sethe about the first” (104). The silence that followed the question awakened the past trauma. After that, Denver refused to show up

for classes, scared of asking her mother those questions, as “terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her” (102), and also fearful of the judgment of her classmates. This produces in Denver a sense of vacant esteem, which is “the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority” (DeGruy 66). According to DeGruy, vacant esteem can be a symptom of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, and, as such, it is transmitted from generation to generation, resulting from the spheres of influence of the society, the community and the family (66). In Denver’s case, she was undervalued by the society because she was black, ignored by the community in accounts of the actions of her mother and, within her family, she sensed Sethe’s guilt and sadness, and “when the parents in a family believe themselves to have little or no value, it reflects itself in behaviors that can instill a similar belief in their children” (DeGruy 66). All of that impacted the assessment of Denver’s own worth, with the wound of the trauma reopened.

Moreover, when “she did muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord’s question, she could not hear Sethe’s answer, nor Baby Suggs’s words, nor anything at all thereafter. For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration” (*Beloved* 103). In those two years, Denver also heard nothing, closing her mouth and her ears for the outside world, living in a fragmented state of isolation, withdrawing from everything else because “she went deaf rather than hear the answer” (105). The recovery of the memory of Beloved’s death caused a silencing in Denver, and the trauma of it made her shut down from the rest of society. What brought her back after two years of alienation was the sound of “her dead sister trying to climb the stairs” (103-104), which announced the arrival of the baby’s ghost into the house. From then on, they were constantly haunted by her ghost, and, consequently, by the memory of how the baby was lost and by the ghost’s spite, which increased their isolation and fragmentation.

In *Beloved*, the community is also shown to have a vacant esteem, as it can manifest in “the difficulty that many African Americans have in celebrating the successes of other black people, particularly (those) considered to be closer to (their) own socio-economic level” (DeGruy 67). In the feast at 124 after Sethe arrived, the abundance of food for ninety people “who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry” (*Beloved* 136). With the excess, the people started resenting and questioning Baby Suggs: “Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when?” (137). The community’s disapproval with the excess can be understood as an “effort to undermine the achievements of other African Americans” (DeGruy 67), as they got angry with Baby Suggs, “the scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air” (*Beloved* 137). For Baby Suggs, “this free-floating repulsion was new (...) Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (138).

Another signal of a vacant esteem in the community is their reaction to the murder of Beloved. Instead of showing support and compassion for Sethe, as many of them, as ex-slaves, must have known what she has been through, they looked at her with judgement and stopped visiting altogether, avoiding interaction with her and the rest of the members of her family. DeGruy attributes this reaction to a vacant esteem because, according to her, “African Americans feel as though one bad act committed by a black person reflects upon all black people” (67). The author explains that African Americans are made to feel like, somehow, they all share a collective blame and humiliation (67). That can be why they did not want to be associated with Sethe, dissociating from her to put distance between themselves and the infanticide, as “perhaps there is an assumption that the repercussions for this stranger’s act would somehow negatively impact how (those) who share the same skin color and/or ethnicity, will be perceived or treated by whites” (DeGruy 67). The shame of Sethe’s actions

became the community's shame, and they did not want to talk about it afterwards, they did not want to comprehend Sethe or try to understand the whole story, leaving them in silence.

This silence is prejudicial, as it interrupts the unity of the group, causing a fissure between the women who lived at 124 and the rest of the community. This fissure could only be repaired through language, through conversation, as I will show in the next chapter, but in the years that followed the event, there was only silence as the visitations stopped and Baby Suggs "grew tired, went to bed and stayed there until her big old heart quit. Except for an occasional request for color she said practically nothing" (*Beloved* 104). What the people affected by the trauma of slavery have in common, whether it was directly or indirectly experienced, is that they are left speechless and fragmented, which results in isolation and a lack of sense of their identity, be it collective or individual.

The question that remains is how these subjects can start to heal from these traumas and reconnect with their community, preventing the next generations from experiencing the same feelings of distraughtness. While there is no simple solution, as black people in America still struggle to fit in and live with the consequences of structural racism nowadays, in Morrison's novels, the manner that these characters can recover their sense of self is by rediscovering their place within the community. This can be done through the recovery of their memory, their stories and finally, their voices, which produce a shared sense of identity. Thus, they can revive their bond with the community with their use of language. Through it they are able to develop their communicative and cultural memory, in a collective act of sharing.

The next topics are focused on how language is used to rescue the communicative and cultural memory of black people in order to portray their experiences as African Americans, with emphasis on the contrast between oral and written discourses, as well as how and to

what purpose Morrison depicts this tension in the context of her novels. Additionally, there is also a discussion about how manifestations of language, such as the act of naming and the use of African American Vernacular English, can represent black people's resistance to the dominant culture in the texts, in an act of rescue of their cultural memory.

1.2 Language and the Black Experience in America

Language, as previously stated, plays a central part in Morrison's novels. Her stories revolve around the use of language, of music and of sound, focusing on what can be done with it, how it can be used to represent and evoke the black experience in America, as well as to promote resistance, healing and restoration of the bond with the community.

About that aspect of her writing, when asked about what she thinks is a hallmark of her fiction in an interview for *The New Republic newspaper*, Morrison emphasizes that

The language (...) is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. (...) The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language.

There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language (...). This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the standard English I want to use it to help restore the other language, the lingua franca. The part of the writing process that I fret is getting the sound without some mechanics that would direct the reader's attention to the

sound. I try to work the dialogue down so the reader has to hear it. (...) That sound is important to me. (Morrison, "Language")

However, it is essential to point out that despite trying to rescue the sounds and the heritage of black people in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison cannot be thought of as representing or speaking for *all* African Americans, as she does not bear the responsibility to declare what can or cannot be considered *truly* African American.

According to Patsy J. Daniels, "each writer must be considered an individual who tells her own story within the framework of her traditional background as well as her contemporary American experience" (12). The author explains that the oppression black people go through at the hands of the dominant culture is a common denominator to capture the experience of the descendants of African people in the United States, but it does not mean that all African American authors have had the same experiences. Certainly, some of their stories have common aspects, but it is important to bear in mind that "the Africans who were brought to the North American continent in chains were gathered from many different African cultures, cultures which perhaps had little in common besides being on the same continent" (12). Thus, "not all African Americans have the same cultural background or experience, but they do have similar histories of enslavement and oppression within the dominant white culture of the United States" (Daniels 7). That being the case, it is impossible to pinpoint an African culture, as Africa is a large continent with many rituals, traditions and values that can differ between African countries and regions. What the African slaves did have in common is the marginalization they endured and the fact that they arrived at the United States without knowledge of each other's language, and thus were forced to learn English in order to communicate with one another.

Moreover, “because families were frequently separated, it has been difficult if not impossible for descendants of African slaves to know anything about their kinship with each other, but they all had the common experience of being traded as commodities and used as animals” (Daniels 12). A great number of descendants of African slaves lost their connection to their heritage, many times not knowing the specific country where they came from, and that can explain why Morrison does not concentrate on trying to rescue a specific culture of a specific African region. Instead of fixating on the idea of representing each aspect of African culture, which would not be viable, she focuses on capturing the feelings and traumas of the African people and their descendants: the sensation of loss that being uprooted from the motherland can cause, the sense of not knowing where you came from nor where you fit in society and the emotions that come from being oppressed and rejected are all present in her works and felt by her characters.

Based on that, Morrison does not try to create a single African language, religion, or culture in order to unify black people’s heritage, as “even in the African-American community, attitudes about African heritage have differed” (Wilentz, “Civilizations” 139). According to Molefi Kete Asante, “Black Americans retained basic components of the African experience rather than specific artifacts” (21). That is why instead of trying to recreate specific traditions, Morrison attempts to capture the experiences African Americans shared by recovering their memories through orality and through the representation of sounds, as it was the manner in which they passed along their stories and it is also what white people have tried to take away from them in order to keep their dominance: their voices. Taken from their homes and thrown in a new land, the first African slaves saw themselves standing at the “edges of two cultures, belonging fully to neither” (Daniels 3). The alternative they found was not to forge a return to a “culture of origin”, as their cultures differed, but rather to incorporate some traditions and cultural elements in a new culture that emerged after

their arrival. This new culture was constructed through their interactions in the United States and influenced by their ancestry, but it also departed from it in order to create a sense of self that was African, but also American, as they were connected to both identities. It is this culture that Morrison tries to capture in her works, a culture of a fragmented subject that finds himself in the acceptance of his community, through shared experiences and values. With it, African Americans were able to preserve the memory of their ancestry while also discovering traditions outside the hegemonic culture, which better represented their shared experiences, creating a cultural space where they could speak and feel like a community.

Moreover, the emphasis on the portrayal of language can be considered a defiance to the silencing black people experienced (and still experience) in American society: the fact that Sethe describes her memories “as ‘pictures’ drifting in front of her face” (Khayati 320) and *Beloved*’s narration questions “how can I say things that are pictures” (*Beloved* 210) implies how their past experiences “exceed the violence of language” (Khayati 320), as they could not communicate the trauma they went through, and, because they could not translate their pain into speech and talk about it, they were not able to process it.

That is why the oral form of communication carries so much weight in Morrison’s works, as it is the way that African Americans can take back the control of their narratives. No matter from what region of Africa the slaves came from, when they arrived in America, this was the way they could interact and share their stories and knowledge. It is also through orality that they were able to perform their rituals, sometimes adapting them to fit with this new culture in which they were inserted. Their sounds were incorporated in their way of speaking the dominant language, firstly creating a pidgin, then a creole, ultimately resulting in a variation of English called African American Vernacular English. Essentially, oral language is how they left their mark in the world, as they did not have access to the written

word because “it was illegal to teach the slaves to read and write” (Daniels 24), the lack of education being another form of oppression.

Knowing the importance Morrison attributes to reproducing the sounds of African Americans in her works to fill the silences imposed by the dominant society, it is crucial to proceed this analysis by counterposing how written and oral speeches appear in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, as well as investigating the meaning these representations carry in the novels.

1.2.1 Oral tradition and the dangers of misrepresentation

In regards to the tension between oral and written discourses, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy points out the problems that arise “between the authority of the archives and the authenticity [or lack thereof] of the slaves’ voices and memories” (“Neo-Slave” 92). He affirms that a written text is a source of trauma for former slaves because it is what was used to disprove their speeches (99), since “the voice of the slave, it seems, is doomed to be doubted where it is not absolutely proscribed” (98). Sherley Anne Williams corroborates this notion by stating that “Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these have betrayed us” (5). This creates an ambivalent relationship with the written word, previously considered “a potent weapon against people of African descent” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave” 99), because African Americans now need to work with something that was formerly used as evidence to disprove their discourses in order to perpetuate their point of view and tell their side of the story.

As an alternative, in stories that deal with slavery, “the answer for many of these authors and characters who are skeptical of writing or believe it positively detrimental is to

subvert writing with oral performances” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave” 101). Authors like Morrison show a movement of resistance when they use the written word to represent an African American experience. In the act of writing, these authors reframe the weapon which was used against black people to clarify their story and to avert the erasure of their narratives. Additionally, by attempting to simulate the oral speech in their works, they challenge the notion that the written discourse holds more credibility than the spoken word while also portraying how, inside the novels, texts were often a source of misrepresentation for black people, so that this tension between orality and textuality will not be forgotten.

In *Beloved*, for instance, writing represents “danger in every form in which it appears” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave” 100). As previously stated, schoolteacher’s list, where he tells his nephews to write down Sethe’s human and animal’s characteristics is an example of how the dehumanization slaves went through was recorded in writing. The list is a source of trauma for Sethe, who “had trouble sleeping” (*Beloved* 195) the night she found out about it. She keeps defending Beloved’s infanticide as an act of protection, for she was preventing her children of feeling the same humiliation she did, as “whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (*Beloved* 251), her children. Her motives, however, were not stated in the newspaper clipping that reported the incident, which Stamp Paid shows Paul D later in the novel.

Thus, the newspaper constitutes another occurrence when writing is used as a way to misrepresent black people in the novel. As the “official record”, the article “reveals the infanticide Sethe had committed, but it is unable to report or even to comprehend the motives that made the fugitive slave take the life of her daughter” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave” 101). Sethe’s point of view is omitted, and, instead, the newspaper keeps the slavemaster’s account of the

occurrence on record. Because of that, her desperate attempt to save her children is replaced by the perception that she was simply crazy.

Moreover, because Paul D could not read, initially he just stared at Sethe's printed picture, repeating the quote "that ain't her mouth" (*Beloved* 154). Although at first Paul D did not know what was written, he already had a notion of the threat that piece of paper carried, "because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear" (155). Aware of that, Paul D focused on Sethe's picture, stating more than once that he was seeing a "picture drawing of a woman who favored Sethe except that was not her mouth. Nothing like it" (155). His insistence that it was not her mouth in the print reflects his reluctance to accept whatever it was written there, his reluctance to believe the dominant narrative because he knew that the paper was written *by* white people *for* a white audience, and whatever was there "would have to be something out of the ordinary—something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps" (156). That is why, even before Stamp Paid read him the article, he was already fearful. After the reading, Paul D keeps his conviction, saying "with a vigor fresher than the first time, 'I'm sorry, Stamp. It's a mistake somewhere' cause that ain't her mouth'" (158). Paul D's emphasis on his belief that it was not Sethe's mouth is also symbolic, as the mouth represents "speech and enunciation" (Kilomba 16) and "within racism, it becomes the organ of oppression par excellence; it represents the organ *whites* want—and need—to control" (Kilomba 16). The controlling of the mouth is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, as it was already discussed in the case of Paul D and the bit, when schoolteacher used it to impose silence and oppression. In Sethe's case, the mouth is "not hers" because the speech in the article is not hers: it does not explain her point of view, since her voice was silenced in the written text, her version of the story initially lost because it was not recorded in writing. Paul D's complaint that Sethe's mouth is not her own

illustrates how the written word is used to control her narrative, to dehumanize her and present her as the whites want to see her, not as she truly is.

Paul D's refusal to associate the image with Sethe is very telling, especially as he states that he has "been knowing her a long time" (*Beloved* 158), implying that what is written in the paper is wrong and that he "knew better" (154), as he had gone through the same silencing as Sethe all his life. By showing how the newspaper, considered the "official record", does not correspond to the full story, Morrison criticizes the records of slavery written by white masters, illustrating how they did not accurately represent all parts of history and showed a biased point of view that frequently misrepresented African Americans. According to Rushdy, in these types of novels, the slaves "respond by positing their memory as a crucial documentary force in history, their voice as a power equal to the written texts they contest" ("Neo-Slave" 101). Sethe's recounting of the story to Paul D later in the novel is the opportunity she has to expose her reasons and her perspective. It is Sethe's retelling that holds her emotions, her thoughts, and Paul D needs to hear the words come out of her mouth, the value of the communicative memory taking precedence over the written records: Sethe's resistance to the control of her narrative is made through her speech.

Thus, in *Beloved*, the oral form of telling stories is used as a representation of communicative memory: it works not only to rescue the ancestor's form of communication, as previously stated, but also to undermine the authority of the written text. The oral speech is the one that can be trusted, for it expresses not only the narrative, but also its context and the community's feelings. The written word, in the novel, is always a source of danger and defamation. This movement proves fruitful because "in dramatizing the traditions of her community, Morrison's novels resemble the oral techniques of the storyteller" (Christian 57), and, in fact, this is another factor that serves to establish an African American culture.

Moreover, by having the characters use their voice as a power equivalent to the written texts that oppress them, Morrison shows resistance by recovering “African modes of storytelling and orature as a way of bridging the gap between Black community’s folk roots and the Black American literary tradition” (Wilentz, *Binding* 81). With that, Morrison “initiated the transformation of an African cultural consciousness into an African American one” (Graham 11), using their oral tradition to rectify their narratives in America, as they needed their voice to contest the official archive.

The tension between oral and written records is also portrayed in *Song of Solomon*. One of the most remarkable instances of this problem in the novel happens when Jake, Macon and Pilate’s father, is killed because white men took advantage of his inability to read to steal his land. When passing on this story to Milkman, Macon states: “Papa couldn’t read, couldn’t even sign his name. Had a mark he used. They tricked him. He signed something, I don’t know what, and they told him they owned his property. He never read nothing” (*Song* 54). In the novel, the written word poses a threat to the maintenance of the peace in the Dead household, as Jake’s death sets a chain of events that results in Macon and Pilate’s separation and, later, in Macon’s distrust of his sister. The family bond is broken because Jake could not read or write. In the novel, the danger of the written records is escalated, not only being associated with misrepresentation, but also showing the more extreme consequences of how writing was used against black people, which resulted in Jake’s death.

Additionally, Jake’s lack of knowledge of the written word causes him grief in more than one instance and Macon goes as far as affirming that “everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn’t read” (54). Besides the episode that resulted in Jake being shot, Macon mentions the instance when Jake “got his name messed up cause he couldn’t read” (54). When he went to the Freedmen’s Bureau in order to obtain his freedom

papers and cement his status as a free individual, the drunk man in the desk mistakenly wrote down the name Macon Dead on his records. Not being able to read, Jake did not notice this mistake, and he only found out about it after Sing Byrd, who later became Sing Dead, his wife, told him what was written in the document when they met. When Milkman questioned why Jake kept the name, Macon stated that his mother “liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (55). Although Jake accepted the name and associated it with his new identity as a free man, the occurrence can be understood as a criticism to the way white people were in control of how black people were defined in society. According to Lucinda MacKethan, “works in this tradition enact quests for identity within a culture which systematically denies the black person’s right to both name and identity as a means of denying his or her humanity” (187). Moreover, the fact that, in the novel, “white people name Negroes like race horses” (*Song* 216) emphasizes their lack of concern over the act of naming in the novel, a tradition that connects black people to their heritage, which further proves white people’s efforts to distance African Americans from their culture and traditions in order to establish their dominance.

In the novel, Jake’s acceptance of his new name produces more than one possibility for interpretation. For Jake and Sing, the name “bore witness to (their) determination to shape a new identity out of a past that has ranked his race” (MacKethan 192). However, “to Macon Dead II, the name means only a heritage of oppression that his father was unable to master or even survive” (MacKethan 191). Macon II saw the name as “a joke”, “a disguise”, a “brand name” (*Song* 24), and, as a result, he despised it, because for him it symbolized the ownership white people had over his family even after the slavery period. It meant that his father was not truly free despite having signed his freedom papers. MacKethan addresses Macon II’s situation, discussing that “in accepting *his* name he is actually accepting the idea that the white man can determine his values and control his life” (191). This proves to be true in the

novel, as Macon's philosophy of success in life was attached to owning material belongings, as he left aside his culture and distanced himself from his family, prioritizing the maintenance of the appearance of the "American Dream". Jake, instead, attached his new name to his new found freedom, shaping it to mean what he wanted.

Having said that, despite Jake's attempt to "wipe out the past" (*Song 55*) by accepting the name Macon Dead, his murder shows that regardless of the meaning he chose, white people still had the power to take control over him and his property, and they did it through a written document that stripped him of his rights, corroborating Macon II's perception that he was not truly free. Although Jake and Sing tried to redefine the name, "they could not shape who they wanted to be exclusively on the basis of courage for the present moment and dreams for the future, because their identities were rooted in a past steeped in oppression" (MacKethan 193). The denial of the past by the acceptance of the new name also proved to be prejudicial because it made Jake lose his connection to his heritage, to his roots. Morrison highlights the extent of this issue by saying that "if you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just *your* name but your family, your tribe. When you die how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name?" (Morrison, "Language"). By abandoning his family's name, Jake's descendants suffer the consequences of his failure to protect the past: his children ended up not knowing the family's origins, which caused Macon II's assimilation and Milkman's alienation from his people, only solved when he embarks on a journey that results in the recovery of his family's history. This recovery can only be made through conversations Milkman has with the people that knew his family in the past and through the discovery of the meaning of the song Pilate used to sing, as there were no written records of his ancestry anywhere. In the novels, the communicative memory in the form of oral tradition is repeatedly used to discover the past

and it is shown to be trustworthy; without it, the history of Milkman's ancestors, which also constitutes a part of his identity and history, would be lost.

Once again, with the Freedman Bureau's papers, Morrison portrays the written text as a source of danger that could potentially be connected to lack of freedom and a distorted representation of African Americans. The association of Jake's new name to an error in the written records illustrates how black people's identities were distorted in the archives that documented the slave period and how unreliable these narratives can be. Morrison's strategy, then, is to use narratives and language to resist the lack of representation and recover these feelings, since "it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive" (Hartman 4). While talking about her own writing, Saidiya Hartman reflects that such narratives are fashioned "to bridge the past and the present and to dramatize the production of nothing—empty rooms, and silence, and lives reduced to waste" (Hartman 4). The same can be said about Morrison's work, as she uses the memory of the past to criticize a present where black people still struggle to be heard, and the difficulty to speak is also present in her characters as a consequence of cultural trauma. In order to fill in this silence created by trauma, Morrison uses language as her weapon, especially because "the language of African Americans does not simply reflect what happened, but through interaction it reconfirms and reconstructs what happened to others and us. Rather than try to erase the first time, the language works to expose it—not to embarrass—but to lay bare the entire range and history of black life in America" (Morgan 34). Since the act of writing plays "a role in the functional areas of cultural memory" (Assmann, *Cultural* 76), by putting her words on paper Morrison is able to preserve black people's cultural memory while also succeeding in portraying the importance of communicative memory to most African Americans, as it is the way they externalize their experiences and pass them along to their community. Morrison's writings, then, translate into

a collective cultural memory with which the community of African Americans are able to identify.

So, language is used to put black people back in history: through it, they can “take back the word” and exercise their right to tell their stories and experiences, preserving their collective memory while fighting the exclusion and the erasure they faced since their arrival in the United States. In doing so, African Americans can portray themselves beyond the violence they endured, and while they do not ignore it, as it is a source of their trauma and should not be forgotten, they fight the notion that they are reduced to it by also presenting their feelings, their religions, traditions and the richness of their cultural and communicative memories.

Additionally, by portraying the negative consequences of simply accepting white people’s definitions without resistance, Morrison demonstrates how one cannot be passive and ignore their past. Although it is not an optimistic outcome, this representation captures a side of the African American experience in the United States, focusing on their battle with the official records and their struggles to resist other people’s definitions of themselves. To counterpose this situation, in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* there are other instances when language is used as a form of resistance to the dominant culture by the characters, be it in the act of naming or in the usage of African American Vernacular English, as it will be addressed in the next topic.

1.2.2 Language as Resistance and the Reclaiming of an African American Cultural Representation

As previously discussed, Morrison’s writing can be understood as an act of resistance in the sense that they create a space that celebrates African American people and their

traditions, preserving their collective memory and assuring their past will not be forgotten. It is important to notice that although Morrison attempts to reclaim an African American experience through her writing, she is not able to give voice to the slaves, neither to recount their actual experiences, as many of them were not well documented. Instead, she prioritizes discussing African American's process of trauma, resistance and healing rather than focusing on providing details of real events.

Besides the act of writing itself and the significance communicative memory holds inside the novels, examples of cultural memory, such as the importance of the act of naming in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* and the use of African American Vernacular English, are also ways Morrison uses language to achieve the maintenance of African American values to fight white dominance in the novels. In contrast to Jake's situation, with the acceptance of the name white people gave him, in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is shown to resist this practice. At first, Baby Suggs noticed that Mr. and Mrs. Gardner, the owners of Sweet Home, called her Jenny. She never questioned it, and only decided to ask Mr. Gardner about it once she was free, although it was something "she had long wanted to know" (*Beloved* 141). He then explains that the name Jenny Whitlow was registered in her sales ticket, as it was the name her previous owner gave her. However, she did not identify with this name, and when Mr. Gardner asked what she called herself instead, she responds "I don't call myself nothing" (142), "but Suggs is what my husband name" (142). When Mr. Gardner's protests that Whitlow is also the name in her husband's bill of sale, Baby Suggs refutes this, stating "Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny" (142). This affirmation demonstrates how Baby Suggs prioritizes the name that connected her to her people, ignoring the slaveowner's attempt to define her. Even after Mr. Gardner's advice that she should "stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro" (142), she ignores it, thinking that maybe he was right, but "Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband' she

claimed” (142). The name bonded her to him, and she refused to lose this relation, even after he was no longer with her. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Melville Herskovits associates the importance of naming in African American culture with West African traditions. According to him, among West Africans, “a person’s name may in so many instances change with time, a new designation being assumed on the occasion of some striking occurrence in his life, or when he goes through one of the rites marking a new stage in his development” (191). Baby Suggs is an example of that, as her name was molded after her experience with her husband, when she decided to take his last name and be known as Baby because that was what he used to call her.

Additionally, Baby Suggs decides to keep the name in the hopes to be reunited with her kindred, concerned about how they could find her or “hear tell of her if she was calling herself some bill-of-sale name?” (*Beloved* 142). This shows a resistance to the erasure of her family’s name, a need to keep engaged to her people since the name reflected who she felt herself to be. Because a name is deeply connected to one’s identity, as it is the way we present ourselves to the world, this indicates that, unlike Jake, she insists on maintaining the memory of her past alive, refusing the definition that whites gave her and choosing to keep the name that tied her to her community. The process of formation of Baby Suggs’s name shows how it is used “as a method of resisting the hegemony of white society through African cultural practices” (Wilentz, *Binding* 90). The contrast with the way Jake disregarded his own name indicates that assimilation and acceptance of the definitions of others are not the only options, there is also the alternative of resisting, of maintaining one’s own name and honoring its history, preserving the tradition of one’s ancestry.

Baby Suggs’s process of naming demonstrates a link to her culture, as it is “passing on the unique cultural traits of Africa within the context of the African-American

community” (Wilentz, *Binding* 90). While both novels present names that are not of African origin, for example, there are a lot of biblical and classical names—such as Pilate, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Circe—Wilentz defends that the maintenance of an African name is not the most significant, “it is the *process* of naming which must survive” (*Binding* 90; emphasis added). About that, Morrison comments that she used the biblical names “to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes” (Morrison, “Language”). The biblical presence, then, represents how Africans were influenced by it when they were introduced to the Western culture, but did not leave their traditions behind, instead, incorporating them and creating another aspect of an African American culture. The presence of the Bible is also significant in *Beloved*, and it shows the merge between African and Western traditions through Baby Suggs’s ritual at the Clearance, which will be explored in the next chapter. This merging of cultures caused by the diaspora enables a form of critical interracial contact: African Americans cannot nor should forget the white European perspective, as they are inserted in a context surrounded by it, but they should not be dominated by or limited to the outside perspective, fighting to find a balance between where they are and where they come from.

According to MacKethan, “the power to name (...) emerges with a novel that affirms both the heritage of the name as a ‘gift of others’ and the function of the name as ‘witness bearer’ to an individual’s treasure of selfhood” (189). It is through that process that Milkman is granted his new name, since before Freddie witnessed him being breast-fed after what was considered an appropriate age in the Western perspective, “his legs dangling almost to the floor” (*Song* 20), he was known as Macon Dead III. Milkman’s renaming illustrates the African practice of prolonged breast-feeding and highlights a conflict in the novel: it “reflects both the knowledge of this traditional practice and the dominant culture’s view that the

experience is somehow obscene” (Wilentz, *Binding* 89). Freddie’s reaction, declaring that “ain’t nothing wrong with it. I mean, old folks swear by it. It’s just, you know, you don’t see it up here much....” (*Song* 21) and that there “used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South. Lot of ’em. But you don’t see it much no more” (21) demonstrates the discordance between African and Western values, and how hard it is to balance both aspects as an African American without being judged. Milkman’s name is given to him as a joke, but it evolves and grows into the meaning of his “double consciousness”, representing his difficulty to balance the principles passed on to him by his father and his ancestor’s traditions, which he discovers through Pilate, and, later, with his journey to Shalimar. At first, he is ashamed of the name, hiding its origin from his father, as he suspected the practice to be “strange and wrong” (21). After his journey to Shalimar, however, he accepts his name, seeing it as another piece of his history. Milkman is only made aware of the power names carry once he is reconnected with his family’s history in Shalimar, discovering the importance of keeping them as a way to preserve the memories, as “when you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (290). The process of naming assures the maintenance of an African tradition within the Western culture, as Milkman notices how a name ties a person to their identity, to their history: “Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness” (291).

Furthermore, the naming process is also shown to be a symbol of defiance to the dominant culture. The first discussion about names in *Song of Solomon* regards the name of a street. Officially called “Mains Avenue”, the street came to be known as “Doctor Street” because it was where Ruth’s father, the only black doctor in the city, lived. The name was given by the doctor’s patients, who did not live anywhere near it, being secluded to the city’s “Southside” section. Despite the popularity of the name, “Doctor’s Street” was never

acknowledged by the post office, since “some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city’s landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that ‘Doctor Street’ was never used in any official capacity” (12). In an effort to make the people abide by the official name, the city legislators posted notes stating that the street “had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street” (13). However, “their attempt to humble the black citizenry backfires in a reaction that is both comic and wickedly sly” (MacKethan 185): the Southside residents saw that as an opportunity to “keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it ‘Not Doctor Street’” (*Song* 13). The maintenance of the name “Not Doctor Street” is more than a mockery of the dominant society; the way they are determined to name the street to “reflect themselves and their memories of one of their own” (MacKethan 186) represents black people’s efforts to leave their mark in a society that constantly tries to erase their presence and push them out. The resistance to keep the name of the street was not an homage to the doctor, as Milkman himself notes how he did not deserve their honor, “they were paying their respect to whatever it was that made him *be* a doctor in the first place, when the odds were that he’d be a yardman all of his life. So they named a street after him” (*Song* 291). In remembering the street as “Not Doctor Street”, they were celebrating what it meant for one of them to be a doctor, the possibility of becoming someone considered important by the dominant society, the memory of this victory alive in the name of the street.

The notion of language being used as a site of resistance is also constructed in Morrison’s works with the use of the African American Vernacular English. Geneva Smitherman defines AAVE as “an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture” (Smitherman 2). Moreover, AAVE presents an aesthetic associated with

African American culture, as Geneva Smitherman notices that “many Black English vocabulary items manifest a poetically appropriate representation of rather mundane reality. Not only is the black lexicon a tool, its figurative power and rhetorical beauty complement its survival function” (70). In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the way most African American characters speak is a written attempt to emulate the “speech rhythms, voice inflections, tonal patterns” (Smitherman 17) and the overall sound of this English variation, noticeable not only in the speeches of the characters, but also in the description of the way they spoke, with emphasis on their tone and timbre, apparent in the depiction of Pilate’s voice: “her voice was light but gravel-sprinkled” (*Song* 39).

According to Fanon, “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (8), thus the insertion of AAVE is important in Morrison’s novels because she portrays the use of a variation that is not only associated with black people in America, but also created by them as a response to being forced to speak the Standard English imposed on them. Seeing that AAVE represents the language spoken by a portion of the black community in the United States, these works of African American literature present language as the essence of a nationality and as a form of resistance to the white culture: the marginalized characters who fight oppression speak AAVE while the characters who try to assimilate to the white culture make an effort to use the Standard English.

Yvonne Atkinson argues that by showing the contrast between characters that speak AAVE and Standard English, “Morrison uses language to define those who are a part of their community and those who are not” (19). For instance, in *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead II repeatedly uses Standard English when talking to the people of his community, in an effort to

disassociate from them and demonstrate his superiority. This is clear, once again, in the instance when Mrs. Bains, one of his tenants, goes to his office to ask him for an extension in her payment's deadline. At first, Macon notices her in front of his office, and as soon as they enter, he sits behind his desk while she remains standing. According to Atkinson, by doing so, "he crosses the boundaries of community principles" (19). That is not the only way Macon showcases his power over Mrs. Bains: he waits for her to make the first greeting, the contrast between his Standard English and her AAVE clear to show that they do not relate to each other, and he has no empathy with her situation, denying her the extension and charging the rent regardless of the difficulties she is going through, threatening to evict her. Mrs. Bains also calls Macon "sir", although she is much older than him, "effectively putting him in the position as controller, master, or The Man, not a favorable position in the African American community" (Atkinson 20). In this scene, Macon is separated from his group, and the use of language is what constructs this notion.

Furthermore, the contrasts between him and Pilate become evident through their language. While Macon's usage of Standard English puts him outside of the community, Pilate's AAVE is used as a language lesson: she "teaches people to know themselves and their place within their community (...) she teaches them how to speak their language, and she teaches them how to listen" (Atkinson 20). In the first conversation Milkman and his friend Guitar have with Pilate, they learn to mind their language. For instance, when they say "Hi", she asks them "What kind of word is that?" (*Song* 39). Guitar answers that it means hello, and she immediately replies "Then say what you mean" (39). From then on, Pilate becomes a guide to Milkman, sharing songs and stories about her family's past. The differences between Pilate and Macon's stories are clear: Macon's stories are filled with rage and greed while Pilate uses her communicative memory to preserve the African American Vernacular English and the oral tradition, to transmit her heritage in forms of memories and

songs that capture the family's history, her values aligned with the community that she is part of. Atkinson points out that "Pilate is a storyteller of power. Macon lacks perception and feelings. He is isolated and fragmented, and he does not even know it, while Pilate is centered within her community" (21). While Macon sometimes tells family stories to Milkman, they are mostly used to convince his son of the need to stay away from them or, worse, to convince Milkman that he should rob Pilate, not contributing to the maintenance of an oral tradition because, through his assimilation, "Macon fails to participate in one of the community rituals of individual actualization through group discourse" (Atkinson 21). Macon's process of assimilation and distancing from the community happens after he started the business of buying houses, which established him and made him perceive himself as superior: "When he was first married he used to talk about Lincoln's Heaven to Ruth. (...) Or when he was just starting out in the business of buying houses, he would lounge around the barbershop and swap stories with the men there. But for years he hadn't had that kind of time, or interest" (*Song* 53). By not making time for the oral tradition and not speaking the same variation of English as them, Macon loses his connection to the community; he is not able to identify with them anymore, as he fails to participate in a tradition that "allows all to be heard and all to listen, a practice that reaffirms the participants' membership in their community" (Atkinson 22). When Macon thinks about Jake, he notices how "his father couldn't read, couldn't write; knew only what he saw and heard tell of. But he had etched in Macon's mind certain historical figures" (*Song* 53). Pilate, then, is the one to carry on her father's oral tradition by using her communicative memory, giving it importance because it represents "an outward expression of group that indicates a connection, a shared history and culture. It unifies the listener and the speaker" (Atkinson 22).

There are scenes in *Song of Solomon* where Macon acknowledges his isolation. One day, when passing by Pilate's house, he hears the women singing. Initially, he tried to walk

past it, “resisting as best he could the sound of the voices that followed him” (33), but when he thinks about his own house, the silence that surrounds it, he realizes that “tonight he wanted just a bit of music—from the person who had been his first caring for” (33), so he approaches his sister’s house to better listen to the song. The music transported him to his past, “made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico” (33). He watched them, marveled by the song, “softening under the weight of memory and music” (34), and although he “could not leave” (34), he also could not enter the house to participate, failing to integrate with his community once again. His alienation goes against “the unity expressed in the traditional African world view” (Atkinson 23), and that is one of the reasons why he is no longer able “to validate [his] existence as part of the group” (23). Although Macon forces himself to speak the standard form of English, there are instances when he unintentionally uses AAVE. That happens when he is talking to Pilate, a witness of his past life in the South, or when he is telling stories about his times with his father. Milkman even notices one of these occasions, stating that “his voice sounded different to Milkman. Less hard, and his speech was different. More southern and comfortable and soft” (*Song* 54), which shows how AAVE links Macon to his past: without realizing it, it is the variation of English he uses to participate in the oral tradition, to pass along the memories of when he still felt a part of the community to his son. However, throughout the novel, he resists his urges to speak the language that links him to his group, ultimately accepting his alienation by not fighting to be reconnected to his people.

Thus, AAVE is used by Morrison as an “identifying marker (...) In the African American culture correct Black English usage demonstrates group identification” (Atkinson 15). Furthermore, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states that “to begin to do this in my own tradition, theorists have turned to the black vernacular tradition (...) to isolate the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other” (27). This shows the length of the separation between black people and white people within their own

language, dividing it in Standard English and African American Vernacular English as a form to distance their discourses. Regarding this, Fanon argues that “the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation” (14). Therefore, by using their own dialect, African American Vernacular English, the dominated ones are trying to preserve the social aspects connected to their identity and race, making this their form of resistance and preventing this separation from their culture. So, the use of the AAVE within *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* serves to portray the oral and informal speech of the dialect of African Americans, and, at the same time, to construct a critique about the domination of white culture over black culture.

In this aspect, Morrison’s purpose seems to be similar to Fanon’s in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “to help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (19), for AAVE represents not only a form of expression for black people, but it is also an aspect of their identity, being loaded with cultural and ideological significance. As such, in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, stylistics, grammatical and phonological choices are seen as fundamental features of the text, as they pass their own message beyond words. If these marks of speech are ignored, the conflict of the characters is lost, which also leads to the loss of a very important part of their identity, as well as their motivations. Furthermore, building identity through the use of language is important because not only does it define a community’s cultural style, their memory and their interpretation of life, but it *is* the community, since “if the cognitive ecology of a language is altered, so is the community” (Morrison, “Home”). As such, Morrison’s conscious effort to keep AAVE in her works can be seen as an attempt to preserve the community’s identity: the use of AAVE matters because it helps to shape the character’s identities while connecting them to their cultural origins.

As discussed in this chapter, Morrison uses language to preserve African Americans' history and to perpetuate their cultural values, such as their oral traditions and the importance of the naming process. Language is also used in an effort to overcome the trauma of being silenced through speech, illustrating how the characters can resist white domination not only through their act of speaking, but also through *how* they speak. It is through language that the characters are able to pass on their memories: in these cases, language is a site of resistance where black subjects can reclaim their identity, their stories and their experiences, portraying the oppressions they faced and taking back control of their narratives. In the following chapter, I examine how language and memory are also essential to the process of healing and to the reintegration of fragmented subjects to the community, as well as how the broken bonds of the next generation can be repaired with the aid of an ancestor figure who connects them to their history.

CHAPTER TWO

Healing, Community and African Heritage

I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity. That it creates community, both within our own community and beyond it.

– Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time*

Introduction

In the introduction of *The Fire This Time*, which is a collection of essays and poems focused on race written by important voices of our current times, Jesmyn Ward discusses the impact language has on black people's lives: it gives them power and provides them the resources to unite people and form a community. It is through words that they can share their thoughts and communicate their feelings to the people that surround them, so a healing process can begin to happen ("Introduction").

Additionally, the title of *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race* references James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time". Roughly divided between looking forward to the future, a concern for the past and present and a discussion about religion, his essay inspired Jesmyn Ward to also organize the essays in her book in a chronological manner: the past, titled legacy, the present, labeled reckoning, and the future, deemed jubilee. This arrangement suggests how Baldwin's words are still relevant today, but it also sends a hopeful message for the future, considering the title of the last passage and the fact that the essays in this section are the most uplifting in the book. According to the author, most of the essays she received concerned the past and the present. For her, this is a sign of how "inextricably interwoven the past is in the present, how heavily that past bears on the future

(...) We must acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, must recall the black diaspora to understand what is happening now” (“Introduction”). This idea, along with the notion that language and the reacquaintance with the community are essential to the process of healing, are in accordance to what is presented in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

Moreover, both works defend that it is only through an understanding and, ultimately, acceptance of the past that one is able to live the present and move forward in the future.

In the previous chapter, the consequences of the trauma of slavery, as well as cultural trauma, were presented and analyzed, showing how the traumatized subject is left speechless and fragmented, ultimately excluded from the community. Furthermore, the value of the oral speech, along with the recovery of the use of language to fight oppression and offer resistance were also presented.

In order to continue discussing the process of dealing with trauma, in this chapter I will address how language and cultural artefacts such as rituals, personal stories, songs and myths are also crucial to the process of healing, as it is through discourse that memories can be recovered and discussed, allowing the alienated characters to come to terms with the past and attempt to move on, at last reconciling with their community. The analysis of the healing process will also take into consideration DeGruy’s suggested steps for healing presented in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. Furthermore, the second part of the chapter focuses on the future, as a discussion of the relation between the representatives of the ancestor figures (Pilate and Baby Suggs) and the next generations (Milkman and Denver) will be brought up to evidence how the younger ones discover their communal identity and, consequently, how to belong in their society, spreading, for the most part, a sense of hope for the descendants to come.

2.1 Healing and Reintegration to the African American Community

DeGruy's suggested steps for healing from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome include the process of building self-esteem, taking control and teaching racial socialization. The author points out that to do so, it is important to build upon traditional strengths such as spirituality and faith, a sense of community and the trust in great leaders to guide the people (102). In Morrison's novels, these processes can be achieved through the use of memory and sounds, with rituals, stories, songs and myths representing black people's ancestral heritage, as it will become clear in the following topics.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the importance given to the community in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. While the novels present narratives that discuss displacement and hope for the future, the conflicts are mostly dealt with through interactions between the individual and the community. This aspect of Morrison's writings can be explained by her comprehension of African culture, since "traditional African spiritualism was an individual as well as collective experience. It encompassed the total well-being of the community, but each person had a role in society, guided by spiritual forces" (Creel 59). K. Zauditu-Selassie reinforces the influence of African values in Morrison's writings by saying that "Morrison's corpus of work presents African spirituality with its accompanying ideas of deities, emphasis on nature, representations of ancestor communication, and the importance of community responsibility—core elements of spirituality and the backbone of African culture" (11). Additionally, it is through the interactions with the community that Morrison explores the ways in which characters deal with remembering to regain a sense of the past in order to be able to imagine a future, putting the healing process in motion. The collective remembering presented in the novels "is defined as the conscious historical and cultural knowledge common to a group of people. Transmitted from generation to generation through the use of traditional oral forms, this shared knowledge assures spiritual and cultural

continuity” (Zauditu-Selassie 149). The importance of the community in the success of the individual is, thus, a central theme in both novels, since they must remember the past together in order to face it, offer comfort to one another and, eventually, move on, recovering their sense of identity as a group.

2.1.1 Rituals, Sounds and Remembering in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, rituals are a source of empowerment, communal bonding, and, above all, healing. According to Joseph Campbell, rituals are the structuring forms of all civilization (*Myths* 38). He argues that since a ritual is an organization of mythological symbols, “by participating in the drama of the rite one is brought directly in touch with these, not as verbal reports of historic events, either past, present, or to be, but as revelations, here and now, of what is always and forever” (*Myths* 66). The rituals present in the novel also provide a sense of communal identity to the subjects that participate in the activities, especially because, as stated by Zauditu-Selassie, “by standing their spiritual ground, Africans maintained and created an enduring identity instead of succumbing to a perishing personhood under the dehumanizing system of chattel enslavement” (9). Additionally, like their language, their rituals had to be adapted to the new reality they experienced, “ostensibly ushering in the creation of an identity fundamentally distinct and new, albeit with feeble traces of cultural memory conceptualized as retentions, syncretism, hybridity, creolization, and the like” (9). DeGruy corroborates this idea when she states that “a great many of the original traditions and customs were lost. What did survive were the tribal stories about the ancestors and the strong rhythmic songs” (102). *Beloved*, then, draws from biblical tradition, folk beliefs and African religions to present “a multi-faceted, rich representation of the power of rituals as instruments to stabilize communities in times of social disturbance, and to promote communal bonding in times of social disintegration” (Santos 316). An example of these

rituals and traditions is the scene of Baby Suggs preaching in the Clearing, a place in the middle of the forest where the community gathered in the summer.

As already stated, with her departure of Sweet Home as a freed-slave and her arrival at 124 in Ohio, Baby Suggs took the role of the spiritual leader of the community. Her house was considered a safe space for the people, where she opened her doors, gave shelter and food to those who needed, and also where people could reunite, celebrate and, specially, feel loved. It is not an accident that loving and cooking appear twice in the quote “giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick; hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (*Beloved* 137), since Baby Suggs’s most important role as a community leader was just to love and accept her people, as well as feed them, both physically and spiritually. Already discussed in the previous chapter, the feast thrown upon Sethe’s arrival represents the physical feeding of the community, an experience that initially made the group feel so “happy that to eat them was like being in church” (136), which can also be associated with a spiritual form of feeding, as it proves to be therapeutic for the community, functioning as a “ritual of stabilization and social reconnection in times of cultural and social fragmentation” (Santos 319). However, this particular ritual ended up releasing the anger of the group when they became frustrated with the abundance they experienced at the banquet, causing a fragmentation in the community that would only be repaired with the exorcism of *Beloved* in the end of the novel. Before that, the main source of spiritual feeding occurred through Baby Suggs’s spread of the Word at the Clearing.

Given the title of holy by her community, Baby Suggs, “accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, (...) became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (*Beloved* 87). She held her “unchurched” services at the Clearing, leading “every black man, woman and

child who could make it through” (87). In there, she reunited the community while, initially, she prayed silently. When she was ready, she put her stick down and called upon the children. She asks them to laugh “and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling” (87). Then she calls for the men and orders them to dance, “and groundlife shuddered under their feet” (87). Lastly, she calls the women to hear them cry “for the living and for the dead” (88). After that, their actions got mixed up: “Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart” (88). After that communal moment of bonding and releasing of emotion, Baby Suggs starts preaching.

Her sermon regards self-love, for the community should love their flesh, “flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass” (88). She encourages them to love their body and express themselves, fighting the silencing that oppresses them by stating that white people do not love them, their body or their mouths: “they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don’t love your mouth. *You* got to love it” (88). This aspect of her speech reinforces how the spoken word holds power in the novel and how “African people have held firmly to the power of language to create the requisite spiritual realities to sustain life in hostile environments” (Zauditu-Selassie 190); in this case, those values were passed along to their descendants.

After her lesson, Baby Suggs stands up and resumes dancing with the people, expressing with her limbs “the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music” (*Beloved* 89). In this ritual, the community becomes free to release their emotions, to share their feelings without shame or resentment, in an act of

healing, as well as resistance to the hatred the white people demanded they should feel upon themselves. The Clearing, then, “represents the space for Africans to repair the ruptures of the past using dance movements to free their bodies from the trauma imposed by enslavement’s limited opportunity for mobility” (Zauditu-Selassie 158). Through this ritual, they are able to distance themselves from the image of inferiority imposed on them.

The ritualistic aspects of Baby Suggs preaching are also enhanced by its biblical parallels. Santos compares Baby Suggs’s service to the Sermon of the Mount, registered in the gospel of Matthew (5:3-11) and the Sermon of the Plain in Luke (6:20-26). He explains that “in the sermon registered by Matthew and Luke, Jesus’s audience comprises people who, for various reasons, had lost their honor and lived in shame (...) Contrary to the religious leaders of the time who shunned outsiders, Jesus offered them love and spiritual relief” (324), much like Baby Suggs did with the community. Baby Suggs urges them to reclaim not only their bodies, but also their pride, their honor and their unity as a group, reinforcing their bonds. Furthermore, the ritual goes beyond drawing from Christian principles, incorporating aspects of African culture, such as the value placed on language, singing and dancing as a form of expression. Zauditu-Selassie emphasizes this aspect by affirming that

This place is defined not only by Christian sentiments, but also by African rituals. African spiritual sensibilities direct and sacralize the space accompanied by the invocation of self-affirming statements. Through her supplications in the Clearing, the members of the community are able to break through the barriers that keep them from loving and living. Baby Suggs’s gatherings are acts of subversion and self-definition helping to restore her village’s psychic equilibrium. (158-159)

The ritual, which constitutes a representation of the cultural memory of African Americans, is one of the “ways in which African people in North America redefined, restored, and

reclaimed the African spiritual personality and recovered identity” (Zauditu-Selassie 6). This movement of reclaiming and recovery explains why DeGruy attributes the role of religion and faith in the survival of African slaves and their descendants as central and critical, as “these vestiges of African culture were eventually melded into the new Christian theology and emerged as a form of worship that can truly be considered uniquely African American” (102). Zauditu-Selassie claims that “it is the continuity of African culture coupled with the arduous experience of struggle in America that informs poems, prayers, and groans of the African American” (6), since “displaced Africans maintained their existing core values to ensure their psychic and spiritual integrity and created a nation out of many people” (8). Through their traditions, African Americans took an active role in molding their values and adapting their culture, creating a new form of expression that merged the place they came from with their new home, neither aspect of their lives left aside or forgotten.

For DeGruy, relying on traditions, faith and religion are steps to move on from the trauma, since African Americans “are not and have never been deterred from placing a high value on their faith and turning to it for assistance and succor. If [they] are to become healthy, [their] deep commitment to God, spirituality and religion will be one of [their] primary building blocks” (102). In *Beloved*, this becomes clear with Baby Suggs’s ritual, since it helps the community to start finding peace, although this peace proves to be temporary: not long after that, the interruption of their unity happens after Sethe’s infanticide. Once again, the community is shamed and wounded and, with Baby Suggs’s refusal to preach or even talk to the people, the possibility to heal through the ritual is denied. Consequently, they become fragmented, their sense of communal identity temporarily interrupted until the final ritual of reparation that occurred with the exorcism of Beloved. However, before that, Sethe begins to find a temporary form of healing with the return of her daughter in the form of a woman named Beloved.

In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Joy DeGruy stresses the importance of telling personal stories to the process of healing. She states that “telling our stories can be redemptive. Telling our stories can free us. Telling our stories can help lift others up” (100). More than that, “story telling is an important part of our education; it strengthens us and helps us build resilience. It helps us put things in the proper perspective” (100). That being the case, initially, Sethe’s conversations with Beloved are a step towards healing. Beloved’s questions and interest in Sethe’s past propel her mother to think about her memories and, after a while, she becomes able to organize her fragmented story in a coherent narrative that she passes along to her daughters.

It is through one of these conversations that she remembered an occurrence with her own mother, who told Sethe about her mark and slapped the girl when she asked to be marked too. She then told Denver and Beloved about how her mother was hung and when she went to look at the body, she could not recognize the mark. That memory incited her to think how “she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross” (*Beloved* 61). The more Sethe talked about her past, the more she remembered the events. This remembrance brought back another one, about a woman named Nan, who she knew back then, before she was sent to Sweet Home. Sethe recalled how Nan

used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (62)

This passage is very significant, as it describes what stayed in Sethe's memory, namely, the singing and dancing in a crowded place representing her culture and the union of the community. These details stayed with her, and although she lost the language her mother spoke in, like so many African descendants, she retained what was more important: the message. The story Nan told her was about her birth and how Sethe's mother threw her other children away at the sea, as they came from white men who "she did not put her arms around" (62). Sethe, however, was different. To Sethe, "she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him" (62). So, even though Sethe forgot the language Nan used to tell the story, she kept the meaning, carrying what was significant to her: her origin story, a part of her family's history, and the significance of her name.

Once again, the exercising of communicative memory is shown to be a step towards healing, as the memories that surfaced helped Sethe to deal with her pain. At first, these memory exercises help Sethe to process her feelings and understand her origins, strengthening her bond with her daughters, especially Beloved. However, after some time she becomes stuck again, when "the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe" (241). After a while, "the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children" (241), but in Beloved's eyes, this was not enough even after "Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears" (241-242). Beloved kept taking until Sethe was no longer able to function, no longer able to work, destroyed by her remorse.

Before Beloved's arrival, Sethe could not think about the past, losing her sense of self and becoming fragmented, which kept her from moving on with her life. After Beloved's

return, she becomes fixated with it, being unable to move on because now the past is all she thought about, being consumed by the guilt of killing her baby daughter. That guilt, along with Beloved's jealousy of wanting Sethe to herself, leaves Sethe once again isolated, as Beloved drives Paul D out of their house and pushes Denver away. Denver notices that, as she "thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (251). Previously, when Sethe refused to talk about the infanticide, Denver feared her, afraid that her mother might do the same with her. After knowing the whole story, Denver is no longer fearful, instead, she understood her mother's motivations and wanted to get help. Sethe's act of sharing her personal stories is what made Denver comprehend her motives, and this enabled her to see how the past was consuming Sethe, leaving her unable to do anything else other than think about it and apologize.

This situation shows how there has to be a balance when one recalls a traumatic past: the person cannot become fixated by it; instead, it is important to use the memory to understand what happened, and then move on, learning to live with it without completely forgetting the trauma. DeGruy's argument that "understanding the role our past plays in our present attitudes, outlooks, mindsets and circumstances is important if we are to free ourselves from the spiritual, mental and emotional shackles that bind us today" (90) condones this notion, because it is not until after Beloved's exorcism that Sethe stops to process what happened to her. Only then she can begin to overcome it, no longer feeling trapped by her past after being forgiven by the community, finally seeing a possibility for her future. In addition, it is only by knowing Sethe's past that Denver can begin to understand and sympathize with her.

These feelings awakened in Denver are what incite her to finally leave the house and get assistance. Used to being taken care of by Sethe her whole life, for the first time she finds

herself in the responsible role, realizing that “the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (*Beloved* 243). When put in this position, Denver recognizes that, for the first time, she has to take control of the situation, as her mother, ridden with guilt and haunted by her past traumas, is not strong enough to do so. Thus, Denver knows what she has to do: “she would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (243). By doing so, Denver starts to regain control of her world, which is an essential step towards healing. According to DeGruy, “we can take measures to gain greater control of ourselves and the way we respond to our world. This too, is part of healing” (96). While witnessing the effects of Sethe’s trauma in a moment of crisis, Denver finally realizes how deep are her mother’s psychological wounds and gathers the strength to take action and resist Beloved’s dominance, no longer accepting her role as a mere passive observer and taking initiative to seek help. Still afraid when she stands on the steps that lead her out of the house, thinking that “out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again” (244), Denver overcomes her urge to go back inside by talking to Baby Suggs’s ghost. Her grandmother continues to guide her, now in spirit, representing the ancestor figure in Denver’s life:

“You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my.”

But you said there was no defense.

“There ain’t.”

Then what do I do?

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (244)

Baby Suggs's speech implies knowing the past, the whole past, is what allows people to move on from the trauma, to the future. According to Rushdy, "historical knowledge, if it isn't the defense, *is* at least the only way to integrity" ("Daughters" 582). While being aware of the past will not promote healing on its own, it is a step towards a deeper understanding of one's origins. Denver needs to understand the larger context, to see beyond her family's narrative and know the whole history of her people in order to relate to them. She needs to be conscious of their suffering, of their feelings, of their communal past. "By leaving the house, she enables herself to know" (Rushdy, "Daughters" 582): only then she can interact with the community, attempting to fix their bond by revealing her side of the story while listening to their point of view, promoting a mutual understanding and restoring a relation that was once broken.

Denver's rapprochement with the community is only made possible because she was finally willing to talk and explain what was happening at her house, a fact that once again reinforces the power of oral tradition in Morrison's novels. First, she goes to Lady Jones, who sees Denver and thinks that "Everybody's child was in that face" (*Beloved* 246). This is a sign of the affinity Lady Jones feels towards Denver, the kinship they share even though the older woman had not seen Denver in years. Denver feels it too when Lady Jones calls her baby: "she did not 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. The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others" (248). Denver can only become a woman once she realizes she needs her people, turning back to the community. The act of seeking help and asking for work and food illustrates how she now comprehends the dangers of dwelling on the past, as it is this action, which began with her leaving 124, that triggers a chain of events that lead to personal and communal healings.

Initially, used to being isolated since her childhood, Denver believed “asking for help from strangers was worse than hunger” (248). However, once she starts receiving aid from the women of the community, she realizes that they were not holding it against her, that they wanted to be involved, as they wrote their names in the gifts of food, “obviously for the return of the pan or plate or basket; but also to let the girl know, if she cared to, who the donor was” (249). Rushdy argues that “those paper scraps represent her place in history—both within the family as a literate daughter of an unlettered mother and within the culture as a remembering being” (“Daughters” 582). When she went to return the utensils, the women started conversations and shared past memories with her. They had their bond with Baby Suggs in common, as “all of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. (...) One remembered the tonic mixed there that cured a relative. (...) One said she wrapped Denver when she was a single day old and cut shoes to fit her mother’s blasted feet” (*Beloved* 249). Their talking can be perceived as an attempt to include Denver in their collective history: they try to relate to her, a gesture that started to restore their bond through their sharing, and, because of it, “the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course” (249). Additionally, the fact that they are now sharing their food is significant, as it was Baby Suggs’s banquet that released a chain of events which resulted in the fragmentation of the community, and their act of bringing food represents their willingness to let go of past grudges. With that, “the community is able to heal and restore the bonds severed in the fatidic day they had left Baby Suggs’s house full of envy and rancor” (Santos 326). Moreover, “the gift of food and the subsequent return of the dishes serve as Denver’s rebirth into the community as she begins to make contact with women and thus allows her to become a woman herself” (Higgins 105). Through her interactions with the community, Denver’s personal healing continues to happen.

One particular instance that attests to that, and also to Denver's growth, is her latest interaction with Nelson Lord. She had not seen him after he uttered the question that made her stop listening and speaking for two years. Upon their reencounter, "all he did was smile and say, 'Take care of yourself, Denver,' but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind" (252). Previously, Denver did not know her family's or her people's history, being uninvolved with her culture and her community, which made her fearful of what she could hear. After she learns about the collective memory of the people who surround her, she accepts the past and stops being afraid of it, refusing to dwell on it and being opened to dialogue; "as much as Nelson's original question had been the closure of language for her, so now is his amiable comment a renewal of communication" (Rushdy, "Daughters" 585). This interaction, then, provides another step towards healing, as discussed by DeGruy: the process of building of self-esteem. Denver's newfound bond with her community allows her to "identify, focus and articulate those positive characteristics in all of [her] interactions with [her] neighbors, coworkers family and friends (DeGruy 95). This encourages her to be able to speak more freely with the people, as she does not see herself as inferior or excluded anymore, starting to feel like she belongs.

This realization encourages Denver to let the community know everything that was happening at 124, which leads to her claiming her identity as a member of the group. Before that interaction, she was still holding back some parts of the story, ashamed to say what was the problem with Sethe, hesitant to mention Beloved. She finally accepts that "it was a little thing to pay, but it seemed big to Denver. Nobody was going to help her unless she told it—told all of it. (...) So Denver told this stranger what she hadn't told Lady Jones" (253). Once she is freed of this secret, the news spread through the people, and the women show acceptance of Denver's social identity as a member of the community by trying to protect her

and arranging the exorcism of Beloved, which is the final ritual of cleansing and restoration present in the novel.

Upon hearing about Beloved, the women of the community are divided in three groups: “those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through” (255). Ella is the one who convinced the women to act, her reason being that “whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (256). Like Denver, Ella does not want to dwell on the past, so she agrees to help, offering Sethe the possibility to reclaim herself by performing a ritual which would drive away the ghost that kept her from moving on.

As for the thirty women that arrived at 124, “some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. *Most brought a little of both*. They had no idea what they would do once they got there” (257; emphasis added). This passage exemplifies how Morrison, once again, merges customs of the community’s African heritage with aspects of American tradition, exploring both sides of the African American identity. Furthermore, the fact that the women did not know what they would do at Sethe’s house but immediately took action when they arrived, first by praying and then by taking a step back to the beginning, in which “there were no words (...) [there] was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (259), indicates how “their subconscious knowledge of their ancient African roots takes control as Ella begins to holler over the quiet prayers and murmurings of the other women” (Higgins 106). Therese E. Higgins argues that all women instinctively knew how to perform the ritual because they all shared common ancestors, as the community of *Beloved* is linked to this common heritage, “a heritage which includes the custom of chanting at funerals, of singing, and swaying while mourning the loss of a loved one” (106). Moreover, according to Roxanne R. Reed, in the

previous passage, “sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, unformed, and undefined. The legitimacy of this sound is anchored in the ancestral heritage, in their African foreparents’ art and practice of storytelling, which incorporated both sound and word” (57). Thus, through their voices, without the need of words, the women give the ritual meaning, as the sounds they produce become the vehicle for communal restoration (Reed 57). Santos adds that the “singing and praying serve as instruments to confront painful memories, mend broken ties, and in the process, help Sethe get rid of the ghost that has been draining out her life” (326). In the end, the ritual is successful not only because it exorcises the ghost, but because it repairs the bond of Sethe and the community, representing a starting point to their recovery and making it possible for them to finally move on.

The sounds produced on the ritual affect the women and Sethe in a similar manner: they recall aspects of their past in order to finally make peace with it. For the women, as soon as they arrived, “the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep” (*Beloved* 258). Through the union of their voices, they relive the day of the infanticide, when the community was filled with anger and resentment and failed to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe of schoolteacher’s arrival at their property. In this process of remembering, they are finally able to “expunge all the poison that had kept them away from Baby Suggs’s legacy of love and charity” (Santos 326), also relieving themselves from the guilt by expelling the ghost and setting Sethe free. In that manner, “these traumatic remembrances allow them to forgive themselves” (Zauditu-Selassie 165). They forgive the people in 124 for their sins while absolving themselves for turning against them and disrupting the harmony in the community. As a group, they “have to tear the terrible past, bit by painful bit out of their beings in order to be healed” (Rodrigues 153). In Sethe’s case, the sounds transported her back to the Clearing, as the women’s voices

“broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (*Beloved* 261). Here, “sound ultimately serves as a metaphorical baptismal pool” (Reed 71), and, because the act of saving Sethe is a collective effort, it also “makes Sethe's baptism a test of communal wholeness” (71) as it advances the process of communal restoration. It is worth noticing that Baby Suggs plays a central part in both cases of remembrance. As a representation of the ancestor figure and a spiritual leader, by making peace with their past, the women are also making peace with her memory, healing the fracture between themselves and her spirit, which has kept the community from being united. As a result of this ritual performed by the union of memory and oral language, Sethe and the community gain strength to face the future and finally move forward. About that, Zauditu-Selassie states that “being reunited with the community of women allows Sethe a return to herself and to properly situate the ancestor, the goal of ritual drama. Appeasement of the spirit of Baby Suggs and the exorcising of the demanding spirit of *Beloved* restores the equilibrium of the damaged community” (166).

The reparation of the bond is attested when Sethe, believing Mr. Bodwin to be schoolteacher and trying to kill him when he approaches her porch, is restrained by the women who were performing the ritual. This gesture can be seen as a form of redemption of their previous mistake, which led to *Beloved*'s infanticide. While stopping Sethe now does not erase the past or the trauma they all experienced, the action implies that, from then on, she will be protected by the community, which will not let her repeat the mistake that caused their breakdown. Consequently, she is once again accepted by her group as they attempt to move on together.

The importance of songs is highlighted all through the novel, for instance, when Paul D could not talk about his trauma with Sethe, he states: “I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul” (71). Although he could not speak about it, he had the freedom to express his pain and sorrow in the form of a song. In the novel, songs

are also used as a way to preserve memory, as Paul D and the imprisoned men got through their work by singing about their experiences: “They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone” (109). After the final ritual is over and Paul D goes to 124 to look for Sethe, the first thing he hears is her humming a melody. Once again, a song is used in the process of healing: the sound helps Sethe to express herself and cope with what happened. After that, they talk, and Paul D realizes “he wants to put his story next to hers” (273). To her, he says “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). With that, Paul D encourages Sethe to continue on her journey with him, to focus on their future, to moving forward after the healing process has been put in motion. Now that they had dealt with their painful past, in order to continue to heal and be released from it, it is necessary that they proceed to move on. Rushdy states that through Paul D’s words, Sethe is able to reclaim herself (“Daughters” 585). Zauditu-Selassie adds that “through ritual re-enactment, Sethe has begun the process of revision, rememory, and remembrance of the ancestor. It is now possible for her to be ‘her own best thing’” (167). In the end, “exorcising Beloved is a means to an end, or, more importantly, to a beginning. The community acknowledges Beloved's existence, but puts it behind them in order to begin again, to be renewed, to rejoice in their continued success of their ongoing lives” (Higgins 103): Sethe’s individual journey becomes the healing journey of the whole community. It is true that the rituals analyzed in this chapter can also be considered forms of resistance, as they preserve one group’s cultural memory while also being a strategy to fight oppression. However, in this instance, their value as a healing mechanism prevails, as they provide communal catharsis and ultimately bring the community back together, which, according to

DeGruy, is a step necessary to continue on the path to healing, as this reunion is essential for the communities to “regain their vibrancy and their relevancy” (DeGruy 104).

Lastly, a striking aspect of *Beloved* is the importance of the women throughout the novel. According to Reed, “*Beloved* evinces womanist theologizing in two specific ways. One, which I have already alluded to, is the maternal, the passing down of survival wisdom through stories in the form of song; the second is preaching” (59). The healing results, mostly, from the women’s actions: the spiritual leader of the community, Baby Suggs, represents the strength and knowledge carried by African American women, as she is responsible for guiding them, teaching them to love themselves and nurturing harmony within the community, giving them a sense of stability. It is also the women who help Denver and who take the first step to accept Sethe back, performing the ritual that allows the community to move forward. Higgins explains the focus on women’s roles in the novel, stating that “it is the women of the community whom Morrison allows to vent their feelings and beliefs. For one understands that if the women forgive Sethe, then the men will follow suit. The women control the action—they are empowered with the means to make or break this community” (Higgins 105). Reed’s statements also promote the idea that women play a crucial role in mending the bond of the group, as she argues that, through prayer and song, the women challenge the evil spirit: “though clearly shocked, they are undeterred, and their singing and prayers overpower the spirit of *Beloved*, attesting to the effectiveness of the informal in achieving the desired communal goal of restoration” (63). The women, then, function as agents of healing in the novel, as they tend the physical and emotional wounds of the community as a whole.

2.1.2 Songs, Myths and Discovery of Family History in *Song of Solomon*

Although the protagonist is male in *Song of Solomon*, like in *Beloved*, the role of the

ancestor is performed by a woman, in this case, Pilate. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Morrison explains the ancestor figure, declaring that “ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate fulfills this role. About the contrast between male and female roles in the novel, she compares Pilate’s relation to male figures to her daughter’s and granddaughter’s relation to men. For many years, Pilate has had a close relationship with her father and her brother, and, according to Morrison, “that intimacy and support was in her and made her fierce and loving because she had that experience” (“Rootedness” 344). Her daughter and granddaughter, on the other hand, did not have meaningful bonds with men throughout their lives, and Morrison attributes the “diminishing of their abilities [to] the absence of men in a nourishing way in their lives” (344). Morrison defends that while women play a crucial role in keeping the history and traditions of African American people alive, men’s contribution to maintain the balance of the group cannot be ignored. For her, “Pilate is the apogee of all that: of the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced” (“Rootedness” 344). Above all, Morrison highlights the value of the ancestor, as “there are a lot of people who talk about the position that men hold as of primary importance, but actually it is if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost” (344) because “when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (344), meaning that without knowledge about where they came from, people become disconnected, losing part of their identity.

Besides representing balance, Pilate is also the one who preserves the past and connects it to the present in the novel. Valerie Smith argues that Pilate’s perception of time is “cyclical and expansive. Instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories, and her bag of bones” (37). Indeed, the song she sings throughout the

novel—first presented when an insurance company agent jumped off the roof of the hospital where, in the next morning, Milkman was born—is the key to Milkman’s recovery of his family’s history. The song and the experiences that Pilate shares with Milkman also illustrate “the function of the African-American woman in passing on stories to future generations” (Wilentz, “Civilizations” 141).

Moreover, the fact that Pilate carries a bag of bones can be understood as a symbol of her connection to her heritage as well as a symbol of how Macon got distanced from his own, carried away by Western values and materialistic desires. At first, Pilate believes that the bones belong to the man she and her brother killed after the death of their father, when they were hiding in a cave in Pennsylvania. Years later, she goes back to that location and collects the bones after hearing the spirit of her father: “‘Sing. Sing,’ and later he leaned in at the window and said, ‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body’” (*Song* 135). To her, his words meant that she should go back and recover the bones, which is what she did. Macon, however, believing that the bag was filled with the gold the man was carrying when they struck him, encourages Milkman and Guitar to steal it from her house. When they take it and find out that the bag contained bones, not gold, she explains it to Macon by repeating what she understood from their father’s words: “You can’t take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it’s a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind” (187). Smith argues that Pilate “believes that one’s sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough simply to put it behind one and look forward” (37). Pilate shows the importance she attributes to life, and how she is moved by her values and her connection to the past, unlike Macon, who is only moved by his greed. The bones hold even more significance when, after his journey, Milkman discovers that they actually belonged to

Jake and informs Pilate about it. The bones, then, illustrate how Pilate fulfills her role as an ancestor figure: without even knowing it, she has been carrying her family's history, her family's heritage.

Initially, what motivates Milkman to go on his journey is the gold. Corrupted by his father's greed, when Macon assumes that the gold is still in the cave, Milkman decides to bring it back and share it with his father and Guitar. Although Milkman begins his trip driven by selfish reasons, along the way he discovers something more valuable than the material possessions he was after, which is his family's history. It is no wonder that Pilate called the bones "her inheritance" (*Song* 93): they were the starting point that enabled Milkman to figure out his cultural inheritance, his family's tale. This journey, then, distances Milkman from his father's self-centered motivations and, as a consequence of the acquired knowledge of his origins, he is brought closer to Pilate, finally able to understand her.

Milkman's journey begins in Danville, where his grandfather lived in the farm with Macon and Pilate. When he arrives, he is not really impressed, thinking that "his father had raved about the beauty of this part of the country, but Milkman saw it as merely green" (201). In this first moment, he feels no attachment to the land: "For a few minutes he tried to enjoy the scenery running past his window, then the city man's boredom with nature's repetition overtook him" (202). In his search for the gold, he interacts with the townspeople, finding out that they knew his family when they lived there, and he begins to feel a connection to the place, listening to their stories about the past: "Milkman felt a glow listening to a story come from this man that he'd heard many times before but only half listened to. Or maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem so real" (206). Like Denver, Milkman only starts to understand his family once he knows details about their stories, and once again the importance of the oral tradition is highlighted here. However, at this point Milkman still wanted the gold, for he believed that it would provide him with a "a clean-lined

definite self" (167), convinced that the gold would give him a sense of identity that he had not found yet.

Before he went to the cave to retrieve the gold, Milkman stops by the farm owned by the people who killed his grandfather. There, he meets Circe, who worked for these people and hid Pilate and Macon, taking care of them until they were ready to leave. In a conversation with her, Milkman finds out about his grandmother, learning that her name was Sing and that she had never been a slave. Neither Macon nor Pilate knew her name, as their father prohibited it from being said in the house after her death in Pilate's birth. He also learns that Macon Dead's real name was Jake, and Circe tells him how his body was dumped at the cave, a fact unknown by Pilate and Macon, as they had already left town when it was thrown there. This piece of family history, however, is not enough to make him give up the gold, so he continues on his way to the cave. While crossing a creek to get there, he ruins his shoes, his watch, and his clothes. When he arrives, he finds nothing. Still convinced that the gold would bring him freedom, Milkman refuses to give up and assumes that Pilate lied and took it alongside with the bones, so he plans to follow her path after she left the cave with it, heading to Virginia in the hopes to find the missing gold.

It is there, specifically in Shalimar, where most of Milkman's transformation is accomplished, with the discovery of the whole story about his ancestry and his reunion with his grandparent's community. In their first interaction, Milkman offends the men of the community by acting superior, not even asking their names. They did not accept him as part of the group in this instance because "they looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (236). Once Milkman realizes this

and drops his pretenses, leaving behind his materialism, the townspeople start to include him, offering food, shelter and the help he needs.

His welcoming into this new community makes Milkman realize his need for human connection, how important it is and how he underestimated its value with the way he treated of his own family: “it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn’t deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others (...) didn’t even ‘deserve’ to hear all the misery and mutual accusations his parents unloaded on him. (...) But why shouldn’t his parents tell him their personal problems?” (245). Milkman reflects about this, finally noticing his entitlement, recognizing that “apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted. And in return he would...what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness” (245). After his time in Shalimar, through his interactions with the community, he gains a new awareness about others, finally feeling like he belongs. Only then he is able to emphasize with the people around him, feeling ashamed about how he treated them before.

With this awakening, he felt himself linked to the people, to the land, “he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it” (248). He found a sense of home, something he did not feel in Macon’s house, since he did not experience any sense of connection to his identity there. Encouraged by that, he proceeds to pursue his family’s story. He finds Susan Byrd, whose father was Sing’s brother, their mother named Heddy. She tells him about the family, how they had Indian origins, and he notices that “he didn’t feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody” (258-259). The more he learned about the past of his

family, the more he distanced himself from his old values, from his selfishness, his indifference, his apathy and his materialism and the more he came to know his own identity, feeling part of a group.

The key to unlock his people's history is found when he hears children singing Pilate's song in Shalimar, although their version is a bit different from his aunt's. While she sang "O Sugarman don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Sugarman don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me.... / O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home" (14), the children's version replaced the name Sugarman with Solomon:

Jake the only son of Solomon
 Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
 Whirled about and touched the sun
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man's house
 Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
 Heddy took him to a red man's house
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell down on the ground
 Come booba yalle booba tambee
 Threw her body all around
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut

Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.

Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.

Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (268-269)

Higgins affirms that “Pilate's song is the driving force behind Milkman's journey and indeed the entire novel” (17) because upon stopping to really listen to the lyrics, Milkman begins making the connections that link this piece of cultural memory to his own family. Solomon, his great-grandfather, was married to Ryna, his great-grandmother, and Jake, his grandfather, was one of his sons. Once Solomon flew away, Heddy, Sing's mother, took Jake in, and the line “Heddy took him to a red man's house” is a reference to the fact that the Byrds were Indians. Milkman becomes exhilarated with each new verse he deciphers, listening and memorizing it—another reference to the use of oral tradition—in order to tell Pilate about it: “He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (269). Although Milkman understands most of the song, linking the names of his ancestors to the names of places in town, such as Solomon's Leap and Ryna's Gulch, there are still missing pieces about some aspects of the song. Thus, now more interested than ever, he goes back to Susan Byrd's house intending to ask her more questions, and that is how he comes in contact with the myth of the flying African, the final piece of his ancestor's history,

which allows him to fully understand his identity and to complete his bond with the community.

Before discussing the myth, it is important to point out how the flying theme is present throughout all the novel. The opening line of the book states that “the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o’clock” (12). Indeed, the scene where Mr. Smith attempts to fly by jumping off the roof marks the first appearance of Pilate’s song, establishing the connection between the flight gesture and the song narrating the tale. Ruth, Milkman’s mother, was also present in that instance, the flight being the trigger incident that made her water break, and, incidentally, Milkman’s birth occurred at the same hospital in the next morning. His interest in flying manifests at an early age, with the narrator stating that “Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself” (17). Milkman’s fixation with flight can be considered a sign of his connection to his ancestors, as he discovers he comes from a lineage of flying Africans. Even after learning that he could not fly, Milkman’s fixation remains, and the theme appears in key moments of the story. For instance, when Milkman and Guitar are discussing how to steal Pilate’s gold, a white peacock appears on the roof of a building. Upon seeing it, “Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly” (162). However, when watching the peacock attempt to fly, he notices that it “can’t fly no better than a chicken” (163) and questions Guitar about it, to which he responds “Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (163). Guitar’s response foreshadows Milkman’s flight at the end of the novel. In his journey, “as he travels farther South, he sheds more and more of his vanity and selfishness until he is devoid of all of the materialistic things that weighed him down” (Higgins 18).

Valerie Smith highlights this aspect of his transformation when she argues that “in his ancestors’ world, communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism; when he adopts their assumptions in place of his own, he arrives at a more complete understanding of what his experience means” (38). It is only when he is able to let go of his individualistic values and his attachment to material possessions, instead, embracing the communal and spiritual aspects of his heritage that he is able to fully understand his identity.

According to Higgins, “the myth of the flying African is well documented in African American literature and the thrust of the phenomenon seems to be rooted in African American history” (6). Recovered from multiple slave narratives, “the common features of the story include an individual African slave or a group of African born slaves who reach their limit in terms of the abuse they suffer at the hands of their owner or overseer. When the slave can take no more, he simply says a word or a phrase and putting his arms up, flies away, back to Africa” (Higgins 7). Joseph Campbell argues that mythic journeys are about seeking “an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actively feel the rapture of being alive” (*Power* 3). This relates to Morrison’s writing in the sense that the myth of the flying African resonates with Milkman’s inner being. When he discovers the meaning of the tale, he feels pure joy as he is finally able to understand his place in the world and define his identity due to the fact that this myth connects his personal present to his family’s past, as a way for him to understand his roots. By showing the impact of African American culture on the sense of community and individuality, Morrison thereby rescues not only their cultural myths, which try to explain the origins of the population, but also their way of transmitting these myths to the group: in oral form. Additionally, Higgins also attributes some verses of Pilate’s song, such as “Come booba yalle, come booba tambee” (267), “Come konka yalle, come konka tambee” (268) and “Belali Shalut” (268) to the magic words and

sounds uttered by the flying Africans in order for them to fly, furthering the connection between these two forms of memory preserved in the novel: the song tells the story of the myth.

Thus, the myth is the final piece that unites Milkman's African heritage with his American nationality, as "it originated in the religion of Africa but was transformed through the experience of America" (Higgins 13). It also epitomizes African American people's double consciousness, a merge between their African ancestors and their American experiences. Susan L. Blake goes as far as stating that the myth "represents a common dream, a common disappointment, and a group identity" (78), as it bonds African Americans in a shared belief of return to freedom. However, Morrison does not shy away from criticizing the illusion of going back to Africa as a sign of freedom, nor does she romanticize the idea of flying as the ultimate solution to African American's problems. She exposes her criticisms by calling attention to the ones that are left behind. It is only after Milkman goes back North and finds out about Hagar's death that he realizes this. Trying to figure out the particulars of her death, he reaches the conclusion that ultimately, the details made no difference, as "he had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead—he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying" (*Song* 293). He then makes the connection of how he was repeating the past: like Solomon, who flew off and left Ryna and their twenty-one children, he left Hagar. Although he recognizes the value of those who stayed, stating that "it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive" (293), Milkman starts to see the selfishness of his great-grandfather's attitude, since his freedom was achieved at the cost of those he left on the ground. Ryna went crazy, unable to raise her children, who had to grow up and fend for themselves. With this, like in *Beloved*, Morrison once again highlights the dangers of romanticizing the past. The author herself calls attention to the delicate balance between honoring the past and being stuck on it: "The point is not to soak in some

warm bath of nostalgia about the good old days—there were none!—but to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us” (“Recovering” 14).

That is why Valerie Smith’s argument that “Milkman’s discovery of his identity lies not so much in his connection with the earth or in his ability to understand his own past; these accomplishments only attend his greater achievement—learning to complete, to understand, and to sing his family song” (40) is not completely accurate. While learning his family song is a crucial step in his quest for identity, because then he comes “full-circle” by learning the myths surrounding his family, his other achievements should not be put in service of his understanding of the song. His search for identity is a journey composed of various aspects, and one should not be put above the other, as they are all essential to the final result of him accepting his heritage and past. DeGruy points out how knowing one’s history is part of the road to healing, as well as a manner of fighting the oppression black people have faced in the United States. She argues that African Americans were convinced to forget their own greatness, and thus “it is vital that [they] collectively regain this knowledge so [they] can take [their] rightful place in the world community. It is crucial that [they] come to understand [themselves] and have that understanding permeate [them] to [their] very core, for such a deep understanding will make healing from [their] wounds that much more complete” (93). Moreover, Smith’s argument can be considered flawed because there is evidence that shows that knowing the song is not the most important aspect of discovering one’s identity, as throughout the novel Pilate was an example of someone who did not have identity issues despite not knowing the complete lyrics of the song or its origins, failing to make the connection between it and her family. Nonetheless, she was still at peace with her identity, as she was capable of understanding and accepting her past.

That is the ultimate lesson Milkman learns in his journey: the importance of knowing the past without being carried away, performing a critical examination of it. In the end, he learns that running away, like he did his whole life, like his great-grandfather did, is not the answer, and he finally accepts the fact that he has to take responsibility for his actions by stopping being selfish and adopting a communal way of thinking. He starts doing so by taking Hagar's box of hair, following Pilate's philosophy, as he "knew what Pilate's version of punishment was when somebody took another person's life. Hagar. Something of Hagar's must be nearby. Pilate would put him someplace near something that remained of the life he had taken, so he could *have it*" (*Song* 293). It is by stopping making excuses and accepting his role in her death, by not fleeing like Solomon, that he finally understands Jake's message: "'Sing. Sing,' and later he leaned in at the window and said, 'You just can't fly on off and leave a body'" (135). In fact, Milkman realizes that Jake "wasn't talking about the man in the cave (...) He was talking about himself. His own father flew away. He was the 'body.' The body you shouldn't fly off and leave" (293). As for the command to sing, Milkman figures that Jake was only repeating his wife's name, the one he forbade to be said in his house after her death, and Pilate misinterprets it and understands that he wants her to sing. About that, Higgins argues that "perhaps both Milkman and Pilate are correct; in believing that her father was telling her to sing, Pilate sings the song of Solomon and in so doing passes on the heritage and story of her ancestors to Milkman, so that he too might sing the song and carry on the tradition to a next generation" (25), so his message is efficient however one chooses to interpret it.

Finally, at the end of the novel, Milkman puts his learnings in practice by choosing to fight instead of flight. Upon his return to Shalimar, where he takes Pilate to bury Jake's bones so he could rest, Guitar, moved by greed, follows them thinking they have the gold and ends up shooting Pilate. In that moment Milkman fully realizes Pilate's greatness: "Now he knew

why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (*Song* 296), she did not have to run in order to be free. His decision to fight Guitar at the end, presented in the quote “For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (297), has been interpreted in many ways by critics. Some, like Valerie Smith, see it as “the ultimate sign of his achievement of identity” (40). Others, such as Catherine Carr Lee, raise the question of “whether Milkman really flies in triumph of individual will, or if he plummets to his death” (59), ultimately arguing that “such a death would be a healing sacrifice of love for Guitar. Yet his leap may not bring death at all” (59). Above all, him deciding to confront his reality instead of being passive, like he has been all his life, can be interpreted as Pilate’s final lesson. He, as well, could try to fly without leaving the ground, riding the air, taking control. Inspired by her, he understands that running is not the path to freedom. He does not need to wander looking for an identity or a home anymore. Now that he has found it, he needs to stay and fight his alienation, owning up to his actions and learning from the past, not letting the bond between himself, his community and his culture be destroyed.

Like Denver, in *Beloved*, it is only when he overcomes his apathy and decides to take an active role in his life and interact with his community that he is able to understand himself and where he truly belongs, in a process of discovery of his own identity. Besides that, DeGruy points out other benefits of taking control of one’s inner world, such as “mitigate our anger, reduce our stress, and feel more at ease and at peace” (96). Milkman and Denver also share similarities in the fact that they are guided by an ancestor figure in the novel: she had Baby Suggs while he had Pilate. Thus, in the next topic it is important to discuss the relationship between these ancestor figures and the next generation, exploring how racial socialization and establishing strong leadership are significant steps towards the healing of cultural trauma.

2.2 Past and Future: Ancestral Figures and the Next Generation

As previously established, Pilate and Baby Suggs represent ancestor figures in the novels. As such, they perform a strong leadership role, which DeGruy suggests as one of the steps towards building a stronger sense of community. She exposes the problem that many African Americans “have grown up ignorant of [their] history and as a result are culturally bankrupt” (104). Milkman and Denver can be considered an example of that, as they only take an interest in their heritage once encouraged and guided by these figures, and, as such, Pilate and Baby Suggs are responsible for what DeGruy calls a racial socialization. She argues that African Americans are often affected by a racist socialization, in which they are led to believe that white people are better and end up associating themselves with all the negative stereotypes attributed to black people. As a response to fight this type of racist socialization, DeGruy exposes the need for a racial socialization, defending that “becoming clear about who we are as well as what is needed for our material and spiritual success is the foundation upon which our health depends. We need to tell our children the truth and prepare them to thrive in the real America” (98). For her, racial socialization “is the process whereby we come to know our strengths, understand the world in which we live, and position ourselves to thrive” (98), and she argues that this can be done through continual education about African American’s history, about their past, about the images they are portraying and about the roles they accept in society.

The suggested paths that lead to a racial socialization are telling the truth about the world, modeling and telling one’s story. Telling the truth about the world is one of DeGruy’s answers to fight the low self-esteem that results from being in a society that constantly fails to accept black people as an integral part of it. In resistance to that, “racially socializing black children, teaching them about the strengths of their family and culture, along with the reality

of discrimination and racism, gives them tools to emotionally and psychologically filter racist assaults against them personally and against black people as a group” (99). In regards to modeling, she argues that role models are often found within one’s family or community member, and in order to understand the world, fight oppression and begin the process of healing, it is necessary to “find them, talk with them and learn from them” (100). Finally, as previously discussed, telling one’s story is essential for strengthening the bond of the community, providing understanding and contributing to the formation of a collective memory. DeGruy points out the dangers of failing to pass along these accounts of the past, stating that the results are people who “are historyless and ungrateful because they have been spared the details of their family’s story. They move through the world lost from themselves” (101). This is how both Denver and Milkman are initially portrayed: aimless and alienated, and they are only able to revert their situation when the past is put into words and exposed to them. It is this acquired knowledge that incites them to take action and take pride in their history. On the same note, Ron Eyerman discusses the cycle of generational memory, declaring that “resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual stories meld through forms and processes of collective representation” (*Cultural* 14). Thus, Eyerman also points out the need to know one’s past as essential in the process of healing, adding that this movement “requires as well significant collective action which both articulates this consciousness and also puts it into practice and through which collective memory is reformulated. It is in this context that the past is reinterpreted to provide a map for the present/future” (*Cultural* 20). It is only through a clear knowledge of the past that one can fully move on in the future, understanding their place in the world and their role in their community.

All these elements that lead to a racial socialization and healing of cultural trauma can be found in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, especially when exploring the relations between

the ancestor figures and the characters that represent the next generations. In the next topics, I will expose how these elements are present and how they contribute to ending the novels with a message of hope for the future.

2.2.1 “I never told you all that?”: Baby Suggs, Denver and The Courage to Break Free

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is initially pointed out as the one responsible for informing Denver about her family’s past. While Sethe refused to talk about it, Baby Suggs provided her with details about her father, making Denver feel like she knew Halle without ever meeting him. Since he was the only one of her children she got to keep, “because they never got split up” (*Beloved* 208), Baby Suggs “got the chance to know him, look after him, and he scared her the way he loved things” (208). She wanted to share her fortune and her knowledge with Denver, so she told her about Halle, providing Denver with an opportunity to know him. Through her sharing of personal stories, Baby Suggs made sure Denver came to understand his personality, his values and his heart: “She told me all my daddy’s things. How hard he worked to buy her. After the cake was ruined and the ironed clothes all messed up, and after I heard my sister crawling up the stairs to get back to her bed, she told me my things too. That I was charmed” (209). Besides connecting Denver to her heritage, Baby Suggs also tried to establish a sense of self-esteem in her granddaughter by telling her about the world. This becomes clear when Denver remembers that

Grandma Baby said people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. Coloredpeople and whitepeople both look down on her for that. 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. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it. (209)

Even after stopping her preaching on the Clearing and excluding herself from the community, Baby Suggs continued to pass on her message, making sure Denver remembered it. She also told Denver not to be afraid of the ghost, it would not harm her because she “tasted its blood” (209) when Sethe nursed her. This can be understood as a message for Denver not to fear the past due to her connection with it. Additionally, by not refraining herself from talking about the hardships she had to face, Baby Suggs contributes to Denver’s social racialization, as “socialization occurs as families provide children with a historical and cultural map of the African American experience that describes how they have survived many adverse conditions beginning with slavery” (DeGruy 84). The connection between them, however, is broken when the elder one dies, which left her granddaughter “mad at Baby Suggs for dying” (*Beloved* 4).

Without Baby Suggs’s lessons and guidance, Denver becomes lost and alienated. It is only in the end of the novel, encouraged by Baby Suggs’s spirit, that Denver gathers the courage to step out into the world and break free. In this scene, Baby Suggs’s spirit realizes that too much was left unsaid between them, but she urges Denver to get out and find out about the world for herself. She continues to be a presence in Denver’s life, as “she stands as the ancestor who gives Denver the courage and the impetus to fight back, to become the strong, reliable woman that Baby Suggs, in freedom, might have been” (Higgins 40).

Although she did not personally know many of the women in the community, “Denver knew *about* several people, from hearing her mother and grandmother talk” (*Beloved* 243), and, thus, this piece of communicative memory assured that the people were not completely strangers to her. When Denver steps out to ask for help, the memory of her

grandmother is the link that initiates her bonding with the women, as they share their experiences with Baby Suggs, holy, and quickly warm up to her kinship. Denver's relation with her grandmother, then, is an essential step for her blossoming: they share a connection that represents the influences of the past on the future. In *Baby Suggs*, Denver finds an example of strength, a role model.

In the end, Denver's transformation into a strong, confident woman is noticed by the one's around her. She gets a job and is fully integrated in the community, inciting Stamp Paid's comment: "I'm proud of her. She turning out fine. Fine" (266). Paul D agrees with his friend, and upon their reencounter he notices how she was now "steady in the eyes" (266), and "the first to smile (...) her smile, no longer the sneer he remembered, had welcome in it and strong traces of Sethe's mouth" (266). Denver is no longer afraid to take action, to take control and to just speak. Additionally, when Paul D tries to talk about *Beloved*, asking if Denver wants his opinion, her answer shows how she has grown: "'I don't,' she said. 'I have my own'" (267), her self-doubt and submission gone.

Higgins recognizes Denver as a representation of "all of the hope of the new generation of African Americans, those who embody both individual strength and the strength found within their community" (107). She goes on to say that "what the community does for Denver and what Denver does for the community creates a balance and restores harmony within their world. All may move forward to a better tomorrow, to a day filled with the memories of the past but also with hope for the future" (107). Rushdy calls her "daughter of history" ("Daughters" 571) and "daughter of hope" (578). He argues that once she learns to confront the past, she becomes ready to face the future, being a new source of remembering in the novel, as he believes she "will tell and re-tell the story that she now understands" ("Daughters" 586). Denver's sense of closure is only achieved after she tells her

mother's story, and by telling it she is able to understand the community's history and her place in it, finally asserting her identity.

2.2.2 "Then say what you mean": Pilate, Milkman and The Quest for Self-Knowledge

Pilate's role as a preserver of family and history in Milkman's life begins even before he is born. His aunt understands the need to continue her family lineage, confiding to Ruth that Macon "ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (*Song* 117). To ensure that, she gives Ruth "greenish-gray-grassy-looking stuff to put in his food" (117). It works and Ruth becomes pregnant two months later. However, not wanting the baby, Macon attempts to induce an abortion, making Ruth drink castor oil, sit in scalding water, use a knitting needle and, when it all fails, he punches her stomach (122). Ruth, terrified, asks Pilate for help, and her solution is to "put a small doll on Macon's chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly (...) he left Ruth alone after that" (123). Not only did Pilate make sure of Milkman's existence, but she guaranteed his survival, protecting him since the beginning.

In fact, since their first interaction, Pilate is always teaching him lessons, being a part of his racial socialization. She calls attention to the way he speaks, urging him to say what he means (39), and he notices how "she was too direct, and to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language" (40). She also tells him stories about her and Macon's childhood and sings, and upon hearing it, Milkman "could hardly breathe" (51); "he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling" (51). There, in her house, "it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy" (49). Milkman urged to be close to Pilate, feeling an instant connection and realizing that, in there, "he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in

love. No wonder his father was afraid of them” (49). His father, indeed, is the one responsible for him withdrawing from Pilate in his later years, calling her “a snake” (56) and ordering Milkman to stay away from her, instead teaching his son his distorted values of selfishness, vanity and greed.

Since “it is difficult, if not impossible, to instill a sense of pride and responsibility in African American children and youth when they remain ignorant about themselves” (DeGruy 102), Milkman’s lack of contact with Pilate leaves him stifled and excluded from the community, because while her rendition of the past helped him grow, Macon’s lessons lead him to unrewarding paths (Wilentz, *Binding* 85). From then on, he struggles with his double consciousness, and his attempt to assimilate leaves him disconnected as he lacks the self-knowledge to realize his need to reach an equilibrium between his American nationality and his African heritage. This is only remedied when he goes South and finds out about his origins. At first, marveled by the discovery, he does not realize the flaws of Solomon’s action. It is only upon his return, when he talks to Pilate and takes responsibility for Hagar’s death, that he thinks critically about the past and acknowledges that going back to Africa and leaving people behind is not the solution. Between these extremes, Milkman sees the alternative in Pilate, recognizing she could fly without leaving the ground. About the need to find one’s place in American society, Wilentz points out how “through the characterization of Pilate, Morrison emphasizes the dead-end of both mainstream assimilation and radical separatism by offering an alternative—perhaps not a reconciliation but a more clearly articulated dialectic of the double-self by the acceptance of one’s African values and cultural heritage” (*Binding* 86). Pilate did not struggle with her identity because she did not put one of her characteristics above the other: while she fought to preserve her African traditions and culture, she was not stuck in the need to go back, accepting her American nationality, preserving both sides of this identity within her stories. Moreover, by understanding and

accepting her past, she found no conflict with her present, being focused on educating and loving her community.

Milkman proves he has learned Pilate's lessons in their last scene, upon her death. When Guitar shoots her, she tells Milkman: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song* 296) and asks him to sing. This is the only instance when Milkman sings in the novel, adapting his family song to fit her: "Sugargirl don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (296). Upon singing, Milkman realizes how much he loved Pilate, and thus, her last words provide her final gift to him: he is now aware of his ability to be compassionated. Wilentz points out how "Milkman is Pilate's chosen recipient of the knowledge of their family heritage" (*Binding* 87) while Higgins notices that "although Milkman's character throughout most of the novel appears to be the antithesis of Pilate's, the two are indeed soulmates and Milkman will succeed Pilate as the towering figure of the Dead family" (17). By singing, Milkman accepts to keep her legacy and to continue on spreading their history. He represents the future, and as the story has been passed on to him, it is now his responsibility to continue this process. It is no coincidence that he discovers the original lyrics of the song upon hearing the children sing; they, also representing the next generations, are fulfilling their role of remembering their history, carrying their oral tradition while keeping their legacy and culture alive.

Lastly, it is important to draw attention to the fact that Morrison's assertion that there is not a formula to healing remains, as nothing gets completely solved in the end. Milkman recognizes that his journey could not fix everything, as he states that "no reconciliation took place between Pilate and Macon (...), and relations between Ruth and Macon were the same and would always be. Just as the consequences of Milkman's own stupidity would remain,

and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done. Hagar was dead and he had not loved her one bit” (*Song* 295). Macon’s newly acquired knowledge of Shalimar and his family’s history does not affect him: he is not encouraged to reunite with the community and ends up stagnated. Hagar, following Ryna’s footsteps, cannot handle being left behind and dies of a broken heart. Her issues are increased by the fact that she did not pay attention to Pilate’s stories, not caring about her heritage, so she stays lost until the end of the novel. Wilentz adds that “these traits are further exacerbated by the imposition of the dominant culture, the lack of a truly extended family, and Milkman’s selfishness” (*Binding* 96). With Hagar, Morrison shows the consequences of the ones who cannot handle the oppressive system, dwelling in their misery and failing to reunite with the community to understand the stories of the ancestors.

Although there is a lack of resolution of some aspects, the novel ends on a positive note: by merging Western and African traditions through Milkman’s transformation, Morrison shows that it is possible to find balance and achieve an in-between space that is both African and American, without the need to put one above the other nor romanticize the past. Through both novels, Morrison attempts to expose the need to know the past in order to understand the present and move on in the future.

FINAL REMARKS

They are tethered together too, by growing up in an era, in a region, in a country, that for much of their lives told them they were nothing. Their stories are both remarkable and ordinary. Their memories, just like those I have explored in this book, are at once powerful, nuanced, incomplete, and so poignant. Their stories led to mine.

– Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*

Clint Smith's words are a reminder of memory's relevance in the formation of a communal identity, as well as the connection between the past and the future generations. Africans, considered to be lesser people by the whites, were brought to America, where they were exploited, abused and humiliated daily. They were silenced, ignored and dismissed when attempting to talk about their experiences, which deepened their trauma, as they could neither express themselves nor share experiences to promote healing. This caused slavery to be a central part of the collective memory of black people in the United States: even if one has not directly experienced it or know of an ancestor who did, this traumatic memory shaped African American's perception of themselves, being part of their history and an experience that defined the members of the community, as they still endure the consequences of its aftermath to this day.

To discuss slavery's repercussions after its end, in this thesis I opted to study Morrison's works *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, since both deal with its aftermath and carry representations of those who directly experienced it and those who did not but were affected by this memory nonetheless. I interpreted these characters considering the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander et al), with focus on Eyerman's analysis of African American identity

formation, which regards slavery not only as an institution but as a collective memory, a sign of a common past that grounded African American people's sense of self. As such, people affected by cultural trauma often struggle with the loss of identity that results in a fragmented subject who has trouble understanding their place in society and relating to their group. This trauma left marks that black people still deal with nowadays, presenting symptoms such as vacant esteem due to racist socialization, anger issues and isolation from the community. DeGruy's concept of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome mentions these symptoms as legacies of trauma, as they are consequences of the behaviors and beliefs acquired by black people in order to survive slavery. These behaviors were passed on to the next generations as they needed to cope with the oppression that persisted in American society, however, healing is only possible if these beliefs are confronted and dealt with, in a movement of reconstruction of the past.

In the first chapter, I discuss these traumas and their consequences, exposing how black subjects are subjugated and neglected in American society. In addition to dealing with the aforementioned traumas, Sethe and Paul D, characters who directly experienced slavery, are also presenting symptoms of PTSD. Abused and silenced all their lives, both of them are left traumatized by their past. They could not translate their pain into speech, consequently, they could not talk about it or process the violence they experienced, actively trying to repress it by internalizing their suffering and feeling shame instead of blaming the aggressors. Because of the trauma, their memories become fragmented, and their inability to deal with the past makes them fragmented subjects: they lose their sense of identity, and with it, their connection to the community. This happens because memory and identity are connected, thus, by repressing their memories they are also repressing part of who they are. With it, the communal identity they share with members of the group is lost, breaking their bond and leaving them excluded and alienated. Additionally, after Sethe commits infanticide as a

drastic response to the fear of going back to slavery, the isolation from the community interrupts her socialization process, which makes her unable to talk about her experiences, once again rendering her silent.

Although other characters like Macon, Milkman and Denver were never slaves, being part of following generations, they still present symptoms associated with PTSS. Macon embodies values of a racist socialization, believing black people to be inferior and prioritizing individual and selfish ideals instead of communal ones. He also gives more value to material objects than to people, assimilating to white society and cutting ties with his black community. His fragmentation comes from his attempt to deal with his double consciousness: as much as he tries, he does not feel American, because his color prevents him from blending with white society, nor does he feel African, as his attempt to assimilate causes him to deny this part of his identity. Influenced by Macon, Milkman is also unable to conciliate both parts of his identity, and this results in his detachment from society, as he does not feel like he belongs anywhere. Milkman's disinterest also makes him oblivious to his family's history. Initially he did not know his grandfather was a slave, which furthers the point that one does not need to know of a specific ancestor who lived in that period in order to experience the symptoms of PTSS. Denver, in turn, is excluded by her group because of her mother's actions. This exclusion impacted her sense of self-worth, causing in her a vacant esteem. Furthermore, her family's past was also unknown to Denver, as she was afraid of asking about it, fearful of what she might find out. Milkman and Denver's lack of awareness about the past created subjects with no sense of their history, and, consequentially, no sense of self. All those situations convey how trauma inhibits discourse and discourages communication. Because of trauma, these subjects refute the group's collective memory, and thus are left speechless, fragmented and lacking a sense of self, which causes their isolation from the community as they become unable to identify with them.

Considering Eyerman's assertion that "there may be several or many possible responses or paths to resolving cultural trauma that emerge in a specific historical context, but all of them in some way or other involve identity and memory" (*Cultural* 4), I decided to carry this analysis by exploring how the characters can reclaim their sense of self, arguing that this can be done through the recovery of their collective and individual memory, their language and cultural manifestations—such as oral traditions, songs, stories, myths and rituals—which produce a shared sense of identity that allows them to rediscover their place within the community. My arguments revolve around the notion that, in the novels, language is used to rescue memory and portray the black experience, producing movements of resistance and ultimately promoting healing.

Morrison's strategies to portray black experience involve the way her characters speak and the maintenance of an oral tradition in her novels. Morrison counterposes oral and written speeches to call attention to the dangers of misrepresentation. In both novels, the written word is used against black people. In regards to the way they speak, Morrison presents African American Vernacular English as a dialect that was created by them as a response to the imposition of Standard English; a variation that spread and is still used nowadays. The fact that most characters speak AAVE can be considered a form of resistance to white dominance, since the characters who fight oppression speak this variation while the ones who are attempting to assimilate, lost and alienated from the community, speak Standard English. Language is used by Morrison not only to preserve African American's history, but also as a site of resistance to the erasure of the black subject's experiences and to perpetuate their cultural values and expressions. Additionally, it is through language that they are able to pass their stories and memories, a necessary step for healing and reclaiming identity.

The importance of passing along stories and traditions is fully explored in the second chapter of this thesis, where I discuss how memory and language are equally significant to the process of healing. DeGruy calls attention to the fact that sharing experiences is important to “build continuity across the generations, and with greater continuity will come a growing understanding of, and confidence in, our power to survive, overcome and flourish” (101-102). Indeed, recovering her memories and passing them to her daughters is part of Sethe’s first steps towards healing. By telling her stories, Sethe is able to organize her fragmented memories into a coherent narrative, reflecting about her past and remembering where she came from, which helps her start to regain a sense of self. Additionally, Denver’s new knowledge about Sethe’s individual past and the communal history of slavery provided her with an understanding of her mother’s actions. After listening to the stories, Denver is no longer afraid, finally gathering the courage to go out, interact with the community, and ask for help. Sethe’s act of sharing set a chain of events that resulted in Denver’s growth and the exorcism of Beloved, which mended their bond with the community. The fissure between the women of 124 and the community was repaired through the rescue of communication and the performing of a ritual, which highlights the importance of language and traditions in the process of healing. From then on, they can all move on from the past together.

The knowledge of his community’s collective memory and cultural heritage is also essential in Milkman’s process of discovery and reassertion of his identity. In his journey to the South, Milkman visits meaningful places to the members of his family, such as Jake’s old farm and Shalimar, his birthplace. On his way, Milkman learns to interact with the community, listening to stories about his family and creating bonds, finally overcoming his apathy and feeling like he belonged. The highlight of his trip is the discovery of his ancestors’ history when he listens to the children singing while playing. By paying attention to the lyrics and talking with the residents of Shalimar, Milkman discovers the story of the

flying Africans and that Jake's father was one of them. With this new acquired knowledge, he feels connected to the people, as he recognizes they all share a common past. He is also able to conciliate both aspects of his identity, African and American, learning that he does not have to ignore either to fit in with his group. Milkman gains a new understanding regarding his identity as he learns to respect his culture and honor the past by continuing the oral tradition and passing the stories along. In both novels, cultural manifestations such as songs, myths and rituals are used to preserve memory and traditions, providing a path to freedom and healing and allowing the discovery of identity through the reunion with the community.

Lastly, Morrison ends both novels with a message of hope for the generations to come. In the novels, the relationships between Baby Suggs and Denver, as well as Pilate and Milkman, represent examples of racial socialization. As ancestor figures, Baby Suggs and Pilate represent the past, functioning as guides to Denver and Milkman and furthering the point that one needs to know the past in order to understand the present and move on in the future. Although Morrison presents criticisms by exposing the dangers of romanticizing the past, Milkman and Denver's stories are examples of instances "where a reworking of the past leads through cultural autonomy rather than assimilation" (Eyerman, *Cultural* 222). They both learn valuable lessons, for instance, that there is an alternative to assimilation and alienation, and that it is possible to find balance and assert an identity that is both African and American without needing to put one above the other. In the end, Milkman and Denver acknowledge that in order to heal, they need to stop ignoring their people's history, recovering their collective memory to better understand their past and heritage, valuing their culture and reinserting themselves in the community. Additionally, they comprehend that the way to honor their ancestors is by not letting them be forgotten, passing those stories along.

Through the analysis of these fictionalized characters and experiences, I believe this thesis brings insights regarding the relations between collective memory, cultural trauma and

healing, adding to the corpus of critical studies of Morrison's novels. Additionally, seeing how DeGruy's suggested steps for healing—such as building self-esteem, taking control, teaching racial socialization, preserving traditional strengths, promoting a sense of community and trusting leaders to guide the people—were all discussed within the context of these literary works, this study contributes to further the analysis of how PTSS can affect African Americans and which paths one can take to achieve healing.

In light of this, it is possible to sustain that, through her novels, Morrison helps to preserve part of the collective memory of the United States. The author highlights the importance of the African American community and their contribution to American society in her novels, without leaving aside a critical view that portrays their struggles with the past and their identity issues. She provides a perspective that prioritizes black experience instead of relying on “official records” that downplay slavery's cruelty and its effects on the population. Her novels can be perceived as an attempt to fight the oppression that black people have faced for centuries, as writing can be considered an act of resistance to the erasure of the participation of African Americans in the history and culture of the United States. Morrison also contributes to the healing of her community through her writing: by incorporating stories based on real events, along with songs, myths and rituals that define African American culture, she is preventing these stories and traditions from being forgotten, thereby making sure they are passed along to other members of the group.

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