Chapter Five

Conclusion

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to
>
> summon the presences of, or collect the absences of slaves; nothing that
>
> reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not
>
> make it.   There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or
>
> park or skyscraper lobby.   There's no 300-foot tower.   There's no small
>
> bench by the road.   There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can
>
> visit, or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or
>
> Providence, or better still, on the banks of Mississippi.   And because
>
> such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. (Morrison,
>
> "A Bench by the Road" 4)

In *Beloved*, before his arrival at 124, Paul D has an excruciating experience in

Alfred, Georgia, where the forty-six slaves are imprisoned and chastised by doing

hard labor.   To manage the slaves, the white guards use a long chain, threading

through the slaves' leg irons to bind them together when they are at work.   Being

chained together, the slaves have to take care of each other, for if one slave runs away,

"all, all for forty-six, would be yanked by the chain that bound them and no telling

who or how many would be killed" (*Beloved* 109).   The long chain shackles the

slaves, eliminating any possibility to run away.   However, it is also this chain saving

them from drowning in the flood.   The long chain, by which the slaves send

messages to each other, links them together to follow the guidance of "Hi Man" and

to find the way out of mud (*Beloved* 110).   After reading the novel, readers may

discern that "the chain" binding the slaves in Alfred symbolizes "the history of

slavery" which binds African Americans, connecting them like an invisible yet

unbreakable chain.   The traumatic memory of slavery is not only individual but

collective; African Americans share these collective memories because most of their

ancestors, as slaves, had been shipped from Africa to America and had experienced

the same atrocities in slavery.   Moreover, as Morrison says in the prologue of this

chapter, there is no place built or named to remind people of the history of slavery and

the slaves dying in the atrocities.   Therefore, Morrison writes the novel to "recover

the silenced voices and experiences of African Americans" (Vickroy 173).   Morrison

considers her novels as the "literary archeology" ("The Site" 112), by which the

author "bring[s] to consciousness what has been repressed and sealed off" (Matus 30).

By writing *Beloved*, Morrison intends to reconnect the past with the present, to

remind African Americans not to neglect "the chain" binding them, and to transmit

their collective memories of slavery to the next generation.

The story of *Beloved* is constructed from the characters' traumatic experiences

in slavery.   However, the task of reconstructing the stories of slavery "is far from

being easy or complete" (Harding and Martin 163) because such stories are full of

traumatic memory which is unspeakable and "often neglected or suppressed by

mainstream culture" (Vickroy 172).   Recognizing the difficulty in representing the

unspeakable trauma, Morrison gives up narrating the story of *Beloved* in a linear,

explicit way; instead, she adopts various narrative strategies to create an intricate

narrative integrating the features of traumatic memory and trauma narrative.   In

doing so, Morrison creates the narrative of "testimony" by which the author

successfully guides the reader to grasp the cruelty of slavery and the characters'
incommunicable feelings of being traumatized.   Noticing Morrison's laying stress on
traumatic memory and trauma narrative in her writing, the thesis explores the intricate
narrative of *Beloved* by means of the psychoanalytic approach, adopting Freud and
Herman's theories to analyze how Morrison interrelates memory, trauma, trauma
narrative, and trauma healing in the novel.

In order to clarify the interrelation between memory, trauma, and trauma
narrative in *Beloved*, the discussion of the thesis begins with the definition of memory
and trauma.   As discussed in Chapter Two, memory is not merely a capacity to
remember things; it constructs who we are, for it is a "vehicle" by which "the
embodied self situates itself in the present by reference to its unique past" (Prager
81-82).   Through the operation of "narrative memory," the subject narrates her/his
experiences, giving them meanings and assimilating them into her/his personal history.
While narrative memory helps the subject to build a system of memory and one's
mental health is maintained by this unified system, trauma is formed when the subject
cannot respond adequately to accidents or atrocities which occur unexpectedly with
overwhelming power.   In *Beloved*, the characters are traumatized by the atrocities in
slavery.   Sethe and other slaves are sold, exchanged, raped, abused, and humiliated
by the white masters.   Being traumatized, the slaves are paralyzed with terror, losing
the ability to integrate traumatic memory into their memory system.   As a result,
traumatic memory, unlike narrative memory, cannot be assimilated into the characters'
personal histories.   Moreover, for Sethe and other traumatized characters, traumatic
memory is unspeakable.   Unwilling to confront their painful experiences, the
characters repress traumatic memory in the unconscious, showing reluctance to

recount it.   Sethe evades telling Paul D the truth of Beloved's death and Paul D hides his traumatic experiences in "that tobacco tin buried in his chest" (*Beloved* 72).   In addition, the characters cannot fully convey in words her/his feelings of being traumatized.   Therefore, for the listener, trauma narrative is fragmented and unintelligible, like the three women's monologues in 124 which Stamp Paid hears but cannot understand.

Since traumatic memory is unspeakable, readers may question how Morrison reconstructs the story of trauma in *Beloved*.   As discussed in Chapter Three, narrating Sethe and other characters' stories in a linear, explicit way may directly inform the reader what happens.   However, such a narrative cannot represent the horrors of slavery and the characters' helplessness of being traumatized.   To represent the unspeakable trauma, Morrison skillfully narrates the stories in *Beloved* with the characteristics of traumatic memory and trauma narrative.   At first, Morrison sets up the scene of Beloved's appearance as the "involuntary memory" by which Sethe's repressed memories are evoked.   After the repressed memories have been brought back to consciousness, the traumatized characters begin to narrate their stories of trauma.   However, the characters' trauma narrative evades reporting the center of their traumatic experiences.   When Sethe recounts her memories of Beloved's death, she circles in the kitchen.   Her movement corresponds to her trauma narrative which also proceeds in a circling style.   Morrison also manipulates the time arrangement in the narrative of *Beloved* to imitate the "deferred action" in trauma.   The "*in medias res* opening" of the novel forces the reader to reconstruct the characters' stories as the traumatized subject belatedly recognizes the event as traumatic.   The time arrangement in the narrative of *Beloved* also manifests the

disorder of tense in the traumatized characters' lives, in which the present is

intertwined with the past.   Moreover, Morrison adopts the symbolic language in the

character's trauma narrative in order to convey their incommunicable feelings of

being traumatized.

The above discussion focuses on how to represent the unspeakable trauma in

accordance with the characteristics of trauma narrative.   In Chapter Four, the thesis

turns to discuss the function of trauma narrative in terms of trauma healing.   For the

traumatized characters, trauma healing is necessary since repression cannot

effectively rid the traumatized subject of traumatic memory.   Traumatic memory is

indelible and, without trauma healing, the characters live in isolation with endless

sorrow.   Moreover, Sethe and other characters' refusals to narrate their traumatic

experiences impede the participation of the other in trauma healing.   For Sethe,

Beloved's return brings her the opportunity to deal with her trauma.   However,

Beloved's return as "repetition compulsion" does not heal Sethe's trauma.   Although

Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she has to kill her, the unforgiving daughter

does not understand.   Without the participation of the other, Sethe's negotiation with

Beloved/trauma reaches an impasse and, instead of being free from the trauma, Sethe

is trapped in her traumatic memory.   For the traumatized characters, "acting out" is

another approach to deal with the trauma without the participation of the other.

Beloved's strangling her mother in the Clearing is her acting out by which she

reenacts the traumatic moment, reversing the role and acting the perpetrator.   Sethe's

acting out derives from Beloved's refusal to communicate.   Unable to make Beloved

understand the motive of her infanticide, Seth has no choice but to reenact the

traumatic moment.   She mistakes Mr. Bodwin for schoolteacher, assuming that

killing him is the only way to retaliate and to protect her children. Sethe's failure in trauma recovery manifests that repetition compulsion and acting out are not the proper ways for trauma healing. Trauma healing, the process of rebuilding the damaged self, needs the participation of the other and trauma narrative is an indispensable stage of trauma recovery. With the other's support in trauma narrative, Denver frees herself from the traumatic memory haunting her family. At the end of the novel, through the reopening trauma narrative between Sethe and Paul D, readers also discern the possibility of Sethe's recovery from her trauma.

　　Beloved, as a novel of the "literature of trauma," is written "from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community" (Tal 21). Recounting traumatic memory has never been easy. However, only by recounting the unspeakable trauma can the traumatized subject find her/his way to recovery. In *Beloved*, Morrison places emphasis on the relationship between trauma narrative and trauma healing. The forty-six slaves in Alfred "talked through that chain" (*Beloved* 110) to save each other. Sethe and Paul D find "some kind of tomorrow" (*Beloved* 273) through their trauma narrative as a "communal 'talking cure'" (Rody 162). After discussing the interrelation between memory, trauma, trauma narrative, and trauma healing in *Beloved*, we realize that *Beloved* not merely represents an unspeakable story of slavery. It is the novel by which Morrison, acting as "Hi Man" in Alfred, cries out to lead "the chain" binding African Americans, guiding them to negotiate with their communal trauma and, eventually, to freedom.