

## Chapter Two

### Memory, Trauma, and Trauma Narrative

*Beloved* is considered as the most intricate novel of Morrison's works. The plot of *Beloved*, based on the story of Garner, revolves mainly around the secret of Sethe's infanticide. The narrative of the novel begins in 1873, when Sethe and her daughter, Denver, are the only occupants at 124, a house located at Bluestone Road, the suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. 124 is widely regarded as "spiteful" (*Beloved* 3) because it is "[f]ull of baby's venom" (*Beloved* 3). Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, had died eight years earlier and Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, leave 124 before Baby Suggs' death for their reluctance to stay in the haunted house. Sethe and Denver live alone without any contact with the black neighborhood.

One day, Paul D, an ex-slave who used to work with Sethe and her husband, Halle, at Sweet Home, arrives at 124 unexpectedly. Sethe cordially invites Paul D to stay and he expels the "[l]onely and rebuked" (*Beloved* 13) baby ghost from 124. Paul D's presence encourages Sethe and Denver to be hopeful about the future, to "[g]o ahead and count on something" (*Beloved* 38). Then a girl called Beloved appears from nowhere; she moves into 124 and turns the occupants' lives upside down. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D eventually realize that Beloved is the incarnation of the baby killed by Sethe. The novel ends with Beloved's disappearance and Paul D's return to 124. Paul D comforts Sethe and pictures to her a new life in which "[h]e wants to put his story next to hers" (*Beloved* 273).

Given the plot summary above, it is clear that the story of *Beloved* is not complicated. In the process of reading *Beloved*, what bewilders readers is not the

plot or characterization but the narrative. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that “[a]lthough the narrative of *Beloved* is infinitely complex, the story is chillingly simple” (107). The narrative in *Beloved* is complex and bewildering because it meanders through the characters’ flashbacks. This episodic format cuts the narrative in *Beloved* into fragments. Readers cannot fully understand what happened to the characters until they finish reading the novel and thread clues together. The narration of the characters also fills with pause, gap, interruption, repetition, and convolution, which confuse and frustrate the reader. The whole narrative in *Beloved* begins with an abrupt opening, foreshadowing the upcoming intricacies. James Phelan indicates that “[t]he first chapter of Morrison’s narrative offers an encounter with the difficult” (230).<sup>1</sup> Readers may ponder over Morrison’s intention to write such an intricate novel. Matus gives the confused readers an answer; she with penetrating insight connects the narrative of Morrison’s novels with history and trauma:

What is the relation of history and trauma to fiction? Current theorisings about trauma and the bearing of witness provide a suggestive frame for much of Morrison’s fiction, whose narrative forms speak of the repressions, hallucinations and discontinuities associated with trauma and whose cast of characters includes many haunted by history, suffering from war trauma, memory dysfunction and unresolved losses. (26)

Matus’ discussion of “trauma,” “repression,” and “memory dysfunction” reveals a

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” states that she writes *Beloved* with an intentionally abrupt opening. She asserts that “[w]hatever the risks of confronting the reader with what must be immediately incomprehensible in that simple declarative authoritative sentence, the risk of unsettling him or her, I determined to take. [. . .]It is abrupt, and should appear so” (228). Morrison wants to throw the reader in an environment completely foreign; like the slaves shipped from their homeland to the unknown America (228).

possibility to explore the intricate narrative in *Beloved* in terms of memory and trauma. By explicating the relationship between memory, trauma, and narrative, the present chapter examines how the three interrelate with each other in *Beloved*.

## I. Memory

Before explicating the interplay between trauma, memory, and narrative, we should define memory first. What is memory? Based on the definition in *OED*, memory is “[t]he faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past” (“Memory,” def. 1.a.). Memory is the space used to store the experience we have. Sigmund Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, explains why human beings need memory—“We find it hard to believe, however, that permanent traces of excitation such as these are also left in the system *Pcpt.-Cs*. If they remained constantly conscious, they would very soon set limits to the system’s aptitude for receiving fresh excitations” (25).<sup>2</sup> According to Freud, memory is used as a container in which we restore our thought, knowledge, and experience. It is the capacity that we develop in order to save the space in the system *Pcpt.-Cs* for receiving fresh excitation.

Pierre Janet, a French psychiatrist and pioneer in the research of traumatic memory, “viewed the memory system as the central organizing apparatus of the mind, which categorizes and integrates all aspects of experience and automatically integrates them into ever enlarging and flexible meaning schemes” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 426). Janet regards memory not only as a containing capacity for experience

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<sup>2</sup> The system *Pcpt.-Cs*. means “the system of Perceptual-Consciousness,” which, in the Freudian theory, denotes the “mental apparatus” processing the perception we receive from without and “[i]t must lie on the borderline between outside and inside” (*Beyond* 24).

but as a processing capacity “which at all times was organizing and synthesizing the incoming information in the light of previous integrated memories” (Perry and Laurence 28). This capacity of memory helps us to tackle new events efficiently by analogizing them to the experience stored in the memory system. By advancing the idea of memory’s processing capacity, Janet foregrounds the significance of a unified memory to our psychic lives. He believes that the well-functioning memory system represents the healthy mental condition. In this regard, B. A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain Janet’s idea that “[h]ealthy psychological functioning depends on the proper operation of the memory system which consists of a unified memory of all psychological facets related to particular experience: sensations, emotions, thoughts and actions” (426).

Memory is essential to our psychic lives; it also guides the narrative of *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, what Morrison attempts to present is the characters’ traumatic experiences in slavery. The narrative in *Beloved* consists of the characters’ flashbacks and the main plot revolves around Sethe’s memories, which are traumatic and repressed. Mobley suggests that, in *Beloved*, Morrison “uses memory as the metaphorical sign of the interior life to explore and represent dimensions of slave life that the classic slave narrative omitted” (191). Vickroy defines *Beloved* as a novel of memorial, asserting that “[m]emory not only guides the narrative in *Beloved* but enacts an attempted recovery or supplement of forgotten or suppressed aspects of the lived past” (179). Deborah Guth also explores the narrative in *Beloved* and interrelates it with memory. Guth states that

[o]n the most immediate level, *Beloved* clearly presents itself as a novel of remembering. Through a stream-of-consciousness technique that

provides fragmented and frightening hints, the narrative meanders through the mind of various characters to slowly reconstruct a portrait of the past, both individual and communal. (325)

## II. Memory and Narrative—Narrative Memory

In terms of the variation on the process of memory integration, Janet further divides memory into two different categories—habit memory and narrative memory. Habit memory is “the automatic integration of new information without much conscious attention to what is happening. This automatic synthesis, or habit memory [. . .] is a capacity humans have in common with animals” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 427). Habit memory is the capacity simply dealing with excitation and reaction; it helps us to store and retrieve memories without further interpretation.

Unlike habit memory, narrative memory is “a uniquely human capacity. In order to memorize well, one must pay special attention to what is going on. Narrative memory consists of mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 427). Janet, in *Psychological Healing*, explicates the interrelationship between memory and narrative:

*Memory*, like belief, like all psychological phenomena, is an action; essentially, it is *the action of telling a story*. [. . .] The teller must not only know how to [narrate the event], but must also know how to associate the happening with the other events of his life, how to put it in its place in that life-history which each one of us is perpetually building up and which for each of us is an essential element of his personality. A situation has not been satisfactorily liquidated, has not been fully

assimilated, until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, through the organization of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history. (661-62, Janet's emphasis)

On the process of memory integration, narration serves not only to store memories but also to assimilate them into one's personal history. Janet stresses the "linguistic operation" of memory by regarding it as "the action of telling a story." Jacques Lacan also considers memory as a "signifying articulation" (*The Seminar* 223). It is "the symbolic history of the subject, a chain of signifiers linked up together" (Evans 110). Narrative memory is a gift for human beings because, by using language, we recount memories and give them new meanings. Jeffrey Prager points out the significance of narrative memory, asserting that "[w]ithout memory to represent the past from which one came, it is impossible to represent one's self as moving through time into the future" (82). Narrative memory is an "inward reaction through the words" (Janet 662) by which we build up personal history and develop our personalities.

### **III. Trauma**

In the light of Janet's idea, narrative memory is the process of experiencing events, storing, recounting, comprehending, and then assimilating. We use narrative memory to integrate our experiences and to maintain our psychic lives as a unified whole. However, not all experiences in our lives can be easily recounted and

integrated into the memory system. People who experience the traumatic events encounter problems in recounting their memories in a linear and unified way, let alone assimilating them into their personal history. For example, in *Beloved*, the characters' narratives of their experiences, affected by their traumatic memory, are fragmented. In order to illuminate how trauma affects memory and narrative, we have to start with the definition of trauma.

What is trauma? Originally, it is a term used in medicine to denote "any injury where the skin is broken as a consequence of external violence, and the effects of such an injury upon the organism as a whole" (Laplanche and Pontalis 465). Psychoanalysts adapt the term to represent an unrecoverable psychic shock caused by accidents. In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis interpret trauma as "[a]n event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organization" (465). Laplanche and Pontalis characterize trauma as "a violent shock," "a wound," and "the consequences affecting the whole organization" (466). These concepts of trauma derive from Freud's trauma theory, which is based on his clinical observation of the traumatized patients.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Freudian concept of trauma shifts several times during his academic life. Freud first relates trauma with neurosis and defines it as "an event in the subject's personal history that can be dated and that has subjective importance owing to the unpleasurable affects it can trigger off" (Laplanche and Pontalis 466). In this period, Freud puts emphasis on "the specific circumstances" from which the event derives its traumatic force (Laplanche and Pontalis 466). Freud then shifts his study to "the original trauma in prepubertal life" (Laplanche and Pontalis 467). He regards this kind of trauma as the first trauma that the subject may experience. In this period, Freud develops the idea that trauma affects the subject by deferred action. The trauma that happens to children in "the scene of seduction" cannot be effective until it is evoked in the second scene after puberty through some association. The Freudian concept of "repression," used by the subject as the defense against traumatic memory, becomes clear at that time. In the next period, Freud's interest in "war neurosis" leads him to connect trauma with accident neurosis. He publishes *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which he readopts the economic perspective of trauma. In terms of "pleasure principle" and "repetition compulsion," Freud frames the hypothesis that "an excessive influx of excitation immediately halts the operation of the

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explicates the cause of trauma and its effect on our psychic lives in an “economic” point of view (7). He indicates that, although human beings experience the world by receiving the external excitation, “*protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli*” (*Beyond 27*, Freud’s emphasis). In order to keep human beings’ psychic lives in balance, “the mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (*Beyond 9*). This so-called “the principle of constancy” is “posited as the economic foundation of the pleasure principle” (Laplanche and Pontalis 345) because “unpleasure corresponds to an *increase* in the quantity of excitation and pleasure to a *diminution*” (Freud, *Beyond 8*, Freud’s emphasis). Freud further states that “[t]he pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy” (*Beyond 9*) and in virtue of the two principles human beings can “discharge,” “avoid,” or “defend oneself against” the excitation from without (Laplanche and Pontalis 341).

In order to operate the principle of constancy, human beings construct a psychical “shield” outside the system *Pcpt.-Cs* to ward off and to filter the external excitation. With the protection of the shield, we can “deal only with very small quantities of external stimulation and only take in *samples* of the external world” (Freud, *Beyond 28*, Freud’s emphasis). The shield controls the influx of excitation and keeps them in the constant level. However, not all events can be regulated easily;

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pleasure principle, obliging the mental apparatus to carry out a more urgent task ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ which consists in binding the excitations in such a way as to allow for their subsequent discharge” (Laplanche and Pontalis 468). In the last period, by revising the theory of anxiety, Freud changes his concern from the external danger to the internal one—“the ego is attacked from within [. . .] *just as it is from without*” (Laplanche and Pontalis 469, Laplanche and Pontalis’ emphasis). The thesis adopts the Freudian concept of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* along with the emphasis on the Freudian repression theory and the “deferred action” of trauma, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.



some painful events, like car accident, rape, catastrophe, even holocaust, occur unexpectedly with the excessive influx of excitation. They penetrate the shield and overwhelm the system *Pcpt.-Cs*. Freud indicates that “we describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” (*Beyond* 29).

Following her father’s viewpoint, Anna Freud defines “traumatic” as “shattering, devastating, causing internal disruption by putting ego functioning and ego mediation out of action” (238). She points out the significant consequence of the traumatic experience. The sudden increase of the excitation violates the principle of constancy and thus halts the operation of the pleasure principle. The traumatic excitation, by means of its excessiveness and abrupt appearance, paralyzes the system *Pcpt.-Cs*, making it incapable of managing the traumatic experience. Without the subsequent discharge, the unassimilated experience is left on one’s psychical history in a state of “fixation.” Freud observes that the patient is fixated to her/his trauma and such fixation is displayed in the patient’s dreams, which “have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident” (*Beyond* 13).

In *Beloved*, trauma is pervasive. As a novel of slavery, *Beloved* depicts the atrocities in slavery, which traumatizes most of the characters. Baby Suggs says, “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (*Beloved* 5). Being a survivor from slavery, Baby Suggs has eight children but “[f]our taken, four chased” (*Beloved* 5). She spends her life working in the

plantation and, when she is free from slavery, she decides to “lay it all down” (*Beloved* 86). She preaches at “the Clearing” (*Beloved* 86) to other blacks but after seeing Sethe kill Beloved, she gives up. “Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived” (*Beloved* 89). Other slaves have the same miserable experiences. Paul D has been put an iron bit in his mouth, chained together with forty-five slaves in Alfred, Georgia, and almost drowned in muddy water. Stamp Paid is forced to share his wife Vashti with the slave owner. Halle goes insane at Sweet Home because he witnesses Sethe’s being abused by schoolteacher and his two nephews. Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, is whipped at Sweet Home, leaving the tree-form scars on her back.

However, these miserable experiences, given their traumatic characteristics, cannot be assimilated into the character’s personal history. Being unable to be discharged, the traumatic experiences fix on the characters’ psychic lives and disturbs them thereafter. Baby Suggs, after being traumatized, “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). Paul D tells Sethe that he would never “be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else” (*Beloved* 72). Suffering from her traumatic memory, Sethe stays in the past and gives up the hope for the future. “[H]er 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” (*Beloved* 70). Trauma not only depresses the traumatized subject but also drives her/him to the corner and forces her/him to do something irrational. When schoolteacher goes to 124, Sethe, driven by her traumatic

experiences, gathers her children to the woodshed and tries to kill them all for her reluctance to let them grow up in slavery (*Beloved* 149).

Denver, like all other characters, suffers from her own traumatic experiences. However, readers may question if Denver has really been traumatized since she did not experience the atrocities which Sethe, Paul D, or Stamp Paid have undergone. Denver has not been tied, whipped, abused, humiliated, not even with an iron bit put in her mouth. What tortures Denver may not be as ferocious as what other ex-slaves have experienced, however, it does not mean that Denver's experiences are not traumatic enough. Denver's situation leads us to the question: what kind of events can be accurately counted as traumatic?

Based on the above discussion about trauma, we have a picture in mind that the trauma experience is "an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner" (Freud, *Introductory* 275). The Freudian definition of the traumatic experience is explicit, yet it does not explain which event with excitation is "too powerful" and traumatic. Robert M. Galatzer-Levy indicates that the judgment on the event's traumatic effect is subjective rather than objective, "not in terms of external events but through the effects of events on the subject." (142). He further elaborates on his idea:

The psychoanalytic definition of trauma involves not only the event but also the subject's response to that event. No event, no matter how obviously unpleasant or bad, is intrinsically traumatic. Nor is the external observer's assessment of an event as apparently minor a guarantee that it is not traumatic. [. . .] They can only be judged

traumatizing in relation to a person's internal capacities to deal with the event, the personal history that gives the event meaning, the availability of social support to deal with the event, and the areas of current anxiety that overlap with the event. For some children who cannot regulate the intensity of stimuli, ordinary noises and scenes may be traumatic (142-43).

As Galatzer-Levy suggests, whether an event is traumatic or not is judged by the subject who undergoes it. In Denver's case, she does not undergo the atrocities in slavery, but the unpleasant experiences in her life traumatize her. Being ostracized by the black community, Denver lives alone with her mother in 124 after Baby Suggs died. The isolation and public apathy revealed by the black community traumatize Denver. She complains to her mother, "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (*Beloved* 14). When Denver is seven years old, she has the chance to study with other children in Lady Jones' house. However, Denver's study is terminated by a question with "no meanness" (*Beloved* 102). A little boy, Nelson Lord, asks Denver about Sethe's infanticide. The question traumatizes Denver; she never goes back to the class and she loses her hearing for two years. These experiences, which might be nothing to Sethe and Paul D, are to the contrary traumatic to Denver.

Denver's traumatic experiences correspond to the so-called "insidious trauma," a concept developed by psychologists and therapists to challenge the conventional definition of traumatic events as "overwhelming" (Matus 28). By insidious trauma, psychologists refer to the "traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily

overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 107). They put emphasis on “the social dimension” (Erikson 185) of trauma instead of treating it as an independent accident, “a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event” (Brown 103). Insidious trauma can be used to interpret the discrimination of race or gender under the dominant culture.

Maria Roots, who develops the concept of insidious trauma, suggests that “[t]he effects of insidious trauma can be passed down transgenerationally through stories of atrocities about what has been done to those who have come before” (374). Denver’s trauma, all related to her mother’s infanticide, is insidious because “the thing that leapt up in her when he [Nelson Lord] asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along” (*Beloved* 102, explanation mine). Being asked about Beloved’s death, Denver begins to “fix on the baby ghost. Before Nelson Lord, she had been barely interested in its antics. [. . .] Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (*Beloved* 103). Nelson Lord’s inquiry traumatizes Denver because it arouses the insidious trauma, which passes from Sethe to Denver transgenerationally.

#### **IV. Trauma, Memory, and Narrative**

Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, suggests that “the traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (34). At the very moment of being traumatized, the subject is stunned and her/his system *Pcpt.-Cs* is paralyzed. The subject, being appalled at what happens, cannot react to the traumatic event and

then integrate the experience into memory system. Being followers of Janet's trauma theory, van der Kolk and van der Hart indicate that traumatic experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and be remembered with particular vividness, or totally resist integration. Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experience, which causes the "memory" of these experiences to be stored differently, and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control. (427)

Matus also puts emphasis on the difficulty of integrating trauma experiences into memory system. She defines trauma as "the very fact that an event or occurrence has not been assimilated; it is not available in the usual way to memory, interpretation, forgetting, distorting and so on" (24). Encountering the difficulty of integrating traumatic experiences, the traumatized subject cannot memorize well what happens in the traumatic event, especially the decisive moment of it. As a result, the content of traumatic memory may be fragmented and discontinuous, even totally missed.

In *Beloved*, Halle is an extreme example for illustrating how trauma affects the forming process of memory. Hiding in the loft of the barn of Sweet Home, Halle witnesses the two nephews of schoolteacher hold Sethe down and suck on her breast. This traumatic scene "messed him up," breaking him "like a twig" (*Beloved* 68). As Paul D says, "Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside" (*Beloved* 69). Halle goes insane and the last time when Paul D meets him, Halle is "squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face" (*Beloved* 70). Paul D admits to Sethe that, with an iron bit in his mouth, he cannot

ask Halle if he really witnesses the nephews' atrocities. Even though he can, Halle would not answer him because the traumatic experience has already disordered his memory system.

Trauma not only affects the building of memory but also disrupts the narration of it. Since the content of traumatic memory is fragmented and discontinuous, trauma narrative, the narrative of traumatic memory, cannot be unified and linear. Considering the characteristic of traumatic memory, Janet suggests that, after being traumatized, "[t]he subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event" (663). Ruth Leys, following Janet's study of trauma, distinguishes traumatic memory from narrative memory. According to Leys, narrative memory "narrates the past as past," yet traumatic memory "merely and unconsciously *repeats* the past" (647, Leys's emphasis). Narrative memory, like "the action of telling a story" (Janet 661), narrates the past events in a linear way, in order to give them new meanings and to build up personal history. Trauma narrative, on the contrary, repeats the traumatic experience without realizing its significance.

## **V. Traumatic Memory: Repression and Incommunicability**

The difficulty of narrating traumatic experiences hinders those experiences from being assimilated into one's personal history. As a result, traumatic experiences exist independently and uncannily in the memory system; they are the existences that the subject disavows and evades. Freud, in *Studies on Hysteria*, suggests that traumatic memory is "intentionally *repressed* from [the patient's] conscious thought" (10, emphasis mine). Repression, correlating with the concept of "defence" in the Freudian theory (Laplanche and Pontalis 390-91), refers to "the

active operation by which people try to bar thoughts, images, and memories from awareness” (Galatzer-Levy 14). Van der Kolk and van der Hart states that the concept of repression “reflects a *vertically* layered model of mind: what is repressed is pushed downwards, into the unconscious” (437-38, emphasis mine). By repressing traumatic memory, the traumatized subject evades recounting her/his traumatic experiences relating to the painful feelings of anxiety, guilt, depression, or shame. The traumatic experiences, removed from consciousness, “*are completely absent from the patients’ memory when they are in a normal psychological state, or are only present in a highly summary form*” (*Studies* 9, Freud’s emphasis). Whether they are absent from or vaguely exist in consciousness, the traumatized subject avoids talking about traumatic experiences in any form.

*Beloved* witnesses the characters’ repression of trauma narrative. Sethe represses her traumatic memory and resists dwelling on the past. Denver once complains to Sethe: “You never told me all what happened. Just that they whipped you and you run off, pregnant. With me” (*Beloved* 36). Sethe does not want to recount her traumatic experiences because, like Amy says, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (*Beloved* 35). When Sethe finds her recounting of memories satisfies Beloved, it surprises her:

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe [. . .] because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a



measure of calm, the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left. (*Beloved* 58)

Sethe and Baby Suggs both agree that traumatic memory is *unspeakable* because by recounting it they re-experience the painful past. When Paul D tries to persuade Sethe to explore the past and to share her inner feeling, Sethe says, “I don’t go inside” (*Beloved* 46).

Even when Sethe has to disclose what happened in the past, she evades speaking out the central event. Denver knows “[h]er mother had secrets—things she wouldn’t tell; things she halfway told” (*Beloved* 37-8). When the conversation gets close to the central event, that is, Sethe’s infanticide, Sethe evades it by “offer[ing] a very selective narrative” (Matus 106). To Paul D, Sethe explicitly recounts how schoolteacher and his nephews abuse her. She also tells him that the ghost which haunts the house is her daughter, Beloved, but she refuses to let him know how Beloved died. On the first day of Paul D’s arrival, Denver intentionally mentions the ghost in 124:

“We have a ghost in here,” she said, [. . .].

“So I hear,” he said. “But sad, your mama said. Not evil.”

“No, sir,” said Denver, “not evil. But not sad either.”

“What then?”

“Rebuked. Lonely and rebuked.”

“Is that right?” Paul D turned to Sethe.

“I don’t know about lonely,” said Denver’s mother. “Mad, maybe, but I don’t see how it could be lonely spending every minute with us like it does.” (*Beloved* 13)

Denver describes the baby ghost as “rebuked” to imply that Beloved does not die in peace. Sethe avoids the key word “rebuked” and turns to discuss if the baby ghost is lonely. She resists talking about what causes the death of Beloved. Then Paul D mentions the “headless bride behind Sweet Home” (*Beloved* 13) and shifts the topic. The scene of Beloved’s death does not reveal at that time. The next morning, Paul D and Sethe have another chance to talk about Beloved’s death:

“[. . .] when the schoolteacher found us and came busting in here with the law and a shotgun—”

“Schoolteacher found you [Sethe]?”

“Took a while, but he did. Finally.”

“And he didn’t take you back?”

“Oh, no. I wasn’t going back there. I don’t care who found who. Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead.” (*Beloved* 42, explanation mine)

When Sethe says that schoolteacher comes to 124 with a shotgun, the scene of Beloved’s death is about to reveal. However, Paul D interrupts Sethe’s narrative and that saves her from unveiling the secret. After Paul D’s interruption, Sethe does not continue her story from where she stops. She tactfully skips the bloody scene in the woodshed, which is right between “the shotgun” and “the jail.” Sethe moves her narrative directly to the scene that she is sent to jail. Again, the scene of Beloved’s death, the decisive moment and the central secret of Sethe’s traumatic experiences, retreats backstage.

Paul D also holds some of his experiences back when he tells Sethe how he is abused at Sweet Home.

Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him.

*(Beloved 72-3)*

Paul D, like Sethe, retains the most unbearable part in his traumatic experiences because it arouses the feeling of shame. Matus indicates that, in *Beloved*, “a fragmented and discontinuous narrative performs a repression of memory” (112). The trauma narrative of Sethe and Paul D corresponds to the Freudian repression theory—the operation of repression as a “defence” against traumatic memory. Vickroy points out the significance of repression to the characters: “Resistance to memory is also important for the day-to-day survival and sanity of Morrison’s ex-slave characters” (181). For the ex-slaves in *Beloved*, “[t]he future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (*Beloved 256*).

The traumatized subject protects her/himself with the operation of repression and thus fragmentizes her/his trauma narrative. Unlike narrative memory, trauma narrative, in virtue of the traumatized subject’s hesitance and concealment, is far from explicit and orderly. For the listener, trauma narrative is like a box of jigsaws, the fragments, from which the listener tries to piece together and to reconstruct a picture of the trauma. However, the jigsaw puzzle is incomplete, missing many pieces, even

short of the central part.

Moreover, there is another factor making trauma memories unspeakable, that is, the “gap” in communication between the traumatized subject and the listener. Jacques Derrida uses the term “différance” to explicate the gap between the “signifier” and the “signified” which differentiates the meaning and defers the transmission—“to differ as discernibility, distinction, separation, diastem[a], *spacing*; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, *temporization*” (“Différance” 18, Derrida’s emphasis). Meanings differ and defer in the process of signification and thus render the complete communication impossible. The subject cannot completely convey her/his emotions in ordinary communication, let alone in the unusual one like trauma narrative. Regarding traumatic memory, Vickroy suggests that “[t]raumatic events create emotional paralysis and are repeatedly relived rather than remembered, with the survivors often lacking a language with which to narrativize it in an accessible way” (170). Joyce Dorado also regards traumatic memory as unspeakable since “the trauma victim’s central nervous system cannot organize the traumatic experience on a linguistic or symbolic level” (96). Rudolf Bernet, in “The Traumatized Subject,” points out that “the violence of trauma is due to its *nonrepresentable character*” (168, emphasis mine). For the traumatized subject, it is difficult to represent in speech the horror and helplessness of being traumatized, and thus, the effect of “différance”—the gap between the signifier and the signified—is magnified in trauma narrative. Matus explicates this idea: “To some extent, as post-structuralist theory has emphasised, our speech is never quite in possession of its meanings. Speech is always the ‘unwitting testimonial’ never wholly in the grasp of the speaking subject. In the traumatized subject, however, this condition of speaking beyond consciousness and control is

greatly heightened” (23). Trauma is the unspeakable signified which can hardly be expressed by words. The traumatized subject cannot specifically express how she/he feels about being traumatized and the listener confronts the difficulty to realize it with empathy.

In *Beloved*, trauma is described by the omniscient narrator as “[t]he things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word-shapes for” (*Beloved* 99). When Sethe encourages Paul D to share his traumatic experiences, Paul D hesitates because he does not know how to convey in words his feelings of being traumatized.

“You want to tell me about it?” she asked him.

“I don’t know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul.”

“Go ahead, I can hear it.”

“Maybe. Maybe you can hear it. I just ain’t sure I can say it.

Say it *right*, I mean, [. . .].” (*Beloved* 71, emphasis mine)

The magnified “différance” renders trauma narrative hardly unintelligible. In *Beloved*, the most specific example of the unintelligibility of trauma narrative is the speech Stamp Paid hears when he goes to 124 after Paul D moves out. Stamp Paid feels guilty of showing Paul D the newspaper clipping, which causes the quarrel between Sethe and Paul D. He wants to visit Sethe and explains it, but, when he approaches 124, the words he hears stop him:

What he heard, as he moved toward the porch, he didn’t understand.

Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn’t nonsensical,

exactly, not was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. (*Beloved* 172)

The speech Stamp Paid cannot describe or cipher is the trauma narrative of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. After Paul D's leaving, the three women live with their evoked traumatic memory symbolized by the space of 124. They disregard the world out of 124 and fall into the traumatic past, which they share together. Sethe, Denver, and Beloved pour forth to each other their traumatic experiences and the feeling of living surrounded by trauma. As a result, when Stamp Paid arrives at 124, what he hears is the intertwined trauma narrative of the three women in 124. Their narrative, in virtue of its traumatic characteristics, is unintelligible to the listener. "Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (*Beloved* 199).

In the light of its unintelligibility, trauma narrative is far more a monologue of the traumatized subject than the communication between the traumatized subject and the listener. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, "[i]n contrast to narrative memory, which is a social act, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not address to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody: it is a solitary activity" (431). Cathy Caruth also regards trauma narrative as monologic because it "defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" ("Introduction" 420, Caruth's emphasis). In *Beloved*, the omniscient narrator describes the trauma narrative Stamp Paid hears as

the monologic whisper:

Yet he went on through. When he got to the steps, the voices drained suddenly to less than a whisper. It gave him pause. They had become an occasional mutter—like the interior sounds a woman makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work: a *sth* when she misses the needle's eye; a soft moan when she sees another chip in her one good platter; the low, friendly argument with which she greets the hens. Nothing fierce or startling. Just that eternal, private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks. (*Beloved* 172)

A few pages down, Stamp Paid eventually realizes the words he cannot cipher are trauma narrative belonging to the three women in 124 and all the traumatized blacks: “This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who has lost their ribbons. What a roaring” (*Beloved* 181). After the chapter of Stamp Paid's visitation, there are three monologic chapters and each one of them represents the trauma narrative of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. The three chapters of monologues are fragmented and incomprehensible, especially the one of Beloved. They correspond to the obscure words Stamp Paid hears when he approaches 124. The three chapters are also the best instances to illustrate the unintelligibility of trauma narrative.

## **VI. Traumatic Memory: An Unspeakable Story**

The two factors discussed above—the operation of repression and the unintelligibility—make traumatic memory an unspeakable story. It is unspeakable

because neither the traumatized subject wants to talk about her/his traumatic experiences nor can she/he clearly and affluently convey her/his feeling of being traumatized. For listeners, trauma narrative is fragmented and impenetrable. However, as Vickroy suggests, the “most anguished sense of the past as lived in the body and the indirect telling of it can be the most faithful rendition of traumatic history” (170). The unintelligibility of trauma narrative “articulates” the presence of trauma and its anguished consequences. According to Andrew Schopp, “Toni Morrison illuminates the paradoxical nature of silence, or ‘the silenced.’ For the women of 124, the unspeakable is to some degree spoken even while it ostensibly remains unvoiced. The women’s unspeakable thoughts are ‘recognizable but undecipherable,’ and thus they constitute an articulated presence” (204). In terms of trauma and memory, trauma narrative, the narrative of the unspeakable memories, “speaks out” the interrelationship between trauma, memory, and narrative. For readers, to know the characteristics of traumatic memory and trauma narrative is to know the way guiding them through the intricate narrative in *Beloved*.