

Chapter Three

Telling an Unspeakable Story

In the last chapter of *Beloved*, when the story closes to the end, the omniscient narrator summarizes the story in a sentence: “It was not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 274). The narrator repeats the sentence three times in order to emphasize the difficulty of “passing down” the ghost story about Beloved.¹ It also accentuates the characteristic of trauma as unspeakable: it is not a story to pass on because it is a story unspeakable. Through the discussion in the preceding chapter, we realize that traumatic memory is unspeakable and trauma narrative is fragmented and unintelligible. As such, the question becomes: How to tell a story that is unspeakable? On the other hand, since the story of *Beloved* consists of the characters’ traumatic experiences in slavery, we may ask: How does Morrison represent in words the repressed memory and the incommunicable feeling of being traumatized? Probing into the narrative in *Beloved*, Vickroy discerns the difficulty Morrison encounters in writing a story full of traumatic memory:

In creating *Beloved*, Morrison recognized the difficulty of making catastrophic events accessible to those who have not experienced them.

Although she utilizes scholarly, historical, and testimonial documentation, the unique aspect of her projects is a focus on individual witnesses,

foregrounding their voices and their individual experience within

¹ Lawrence, in “Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*,” argues that the sentence—“It was not a story to pass on”—has double meanings. “To pass on,” as Lawrence suggests, can be understood as “to pass down” or as “to die away” (244). As a result, the sentence can be interpreted like “it is not a story which will be handed down” as well as “it is not a story which will be forgotten”. This chapter adopts the first meaning, “to pass down,” and the other meaning, “to die away,” will be discussed in the next chapter.

re-created traumatic contexts in order to bring forth what has lost its immediacy in historical analysis. (174)

Vickroy uses the word “individual witnesses” and “individual experience” to emphasize that traumatic memory is unique, private, and incommunicable. Historical analysis, like narrative memory, is written in the form of accessible linearity in order to assimilate an event into human history. However, traumatic memory, which has not “been fully integrated as it occurred,” is contrary to narrative memory, which is “integrated into a completed story of the past” (Caruth, “Introduction” 419). For Morrison, writing down Sethe and other characters’ traumatic experiences in a linear and explicit narrative is far from the characteristic of trauma narrative. As Caruth suggests, “the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and other’s knowledge of the past, may lose both the *precision* and the *force* that characterizes traumatic recall” (“Introduction” 420, emphasis mine). The linear and explicit narrative can neither represent the unspeakable traumatic experiences nor convey the characters’ feelings of being traumatized. In “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” Morrison notes that in her writing, she “fret[s] the pieces and fragments of memory because too often we want the whole thing” (388). In fact, as Vickroy indicates, the serious trauma writers “attempt to guide readers through a re-created process of traumatic memory in order that this experience be understood more widely, as in Morrison’s *Beloved*” (8). By imitating the characteristic of trauma narrative, Morrison represents in *Beloved* the repressed traumatic memory and guides the reader to appreciate the characters’ feelings of being traumatized. This chapter, by examining the narrative in *Beloved*, explores the

narrative strategies Morrison adopts while creating the plot similar to trauma narrative.

I. The Return of the Repressed—Involuntary Memory

Traumatic memory, as we know, is repressed by the traumatized subject into the unconscious. In order to represent the unspeakable story, Morrison and other trauma writers have to bring the repressed memory back into the character's consciousness. Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, argues that in the unconscious "[t]he repressed retains its upward urge, its effort to force its way to consciousness" (95). The repressed memories "were in the patient's possession and were ready to emerge in association to what was still known by him" (Freud, *Five Lectures* 23). Freud further indicates that under some conditions the repressed memory will be evoked. For example, the weakening of the force of repression conducted by consciousness, "as happens regularly in the state of sleep" (*Moses* 95), or "recent experience impressions or experiences occur which resemble the repressed so closely that they are able to awaken it" (*Moses* 95). Van der Kolk and van der Hart explicate the process of bringing traumatic memory back into consciousness:

[T]raumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. These circumstances trigger the traumatic memory. [. . .] Traumatic memory is produced by the mechanism which Janet called *restitutio ad integrum*. When one element of a traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically. (431)²

² *Restitutio ad integrum* is a Latin term. According to *OED*, it means "restoration to the uninjured

Janet's concept of *restitutio ad integrum* is similar to "involuntary memory"—the term derives from the writing of Marcel Proust who divides memory into "voluntary memory" and "involuntary memory." Walter Benjamin, in "On the Image of Proust," adopts the term and enlarges its concept to analyze Proust's writing strategies (238-39). Benjamin regards Proust's works as "the universe of intertwining" (244). Proust employs the flow of involuntary memory to connect the related details of the past and to "charge an entire lifetime with the utmost mental awareness" (Benjamin 244). At the time of writing *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust locks himself in a room isolated from the external world and immerses himself into involuntary memory. He writes in a way like daydream in order to revive the unremembered memories in a "free-floating form" (Benjamin 246). According to Benjamin, Proust's writings create "the world in a state of similarity, and in it the *correspondences* rule" (244, Benjamin's emphasis).

The significance of involuntary memory resides in its uncontrollability. Not being ruled by consciousness, involuntary memory causes the "breakdown of repressive defense and the flooding of awareness with vivid reexperiencing of past events that occurs in the face of stimuli that invite the recollection of painful happenings" (Galatzer-Levy 147). Involuntary memory frees traumatic memory from the operation of repression and brings it back to consciousness. In a short speech on Proust, Benjamin indicates that "[c]oncerning the *mémoire involontaire*: not only do its images not come when we try to call them up; rather, they are images which we have never seen before we remember them. [. . .] Yet these images,

state" ("Restitutio in integrum"). Janet uses the term to illuminate that the evoked memory will bring back other repressed memories.

developed in the dark room of the lived moment, are the most important we will ever see” (qtd. in Hansen 179, Hansen’s emphasis).

In *Beloved*, involuntary memory works since the characters’ repressed memories are brought back to consciousness in a state of suddenness and without intending. Before the trauma narrative in the novel begins, there is a scene in which Sethe’s repressed memories are evoked. To Sethe, the operation of involuntary memory breaks the barrier of repression and unexpectedly revives her traumatic memory:

[H]er memory of Buglar was fading fast. Howard at least had a head shape nobody could forget. As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. [. . .] Then something. [. . .] [A]nd suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eye, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. (*Beloved* 6)

The Sweet Home’s “rolling out” signifies the return of the repressed memory. We do not know what evokes Sethe’s memory. As Morrison suggests, “[t]here may be play and arbitrariness in the way memory surfaces” (“Memory” 388). No matter what

Sethe senses, it brings traumatic memory back to her consciousness. In *Beloved*, after the scene of Sethe's involuntary memory, here comes Paul D, "the last of Sweet Home men" (*Beloved* 6). Paul D's unexpected appearance is like the return of the repressed memory. Involuntary memory brings back the intangible painful past and tangible Paul D both related to Sweet Home, the origin of Sethe's traumatic memory. The revived memories and the appearance of Paul D activate the trauma narrative among characters in the following pages of *Beloved*.

Another scene in which involuntary memory works in the novel is Beloved's return in the flesh as a young woman. When Sethe, Paul D, and Denver come back from the carnival in town, they see Beloved sits down and sleeps on "a stump not far from the steps of 124" (*Beloved* 50). As soon as Sethe sees Beloved, her "bladder filled to capacity. [. . .] Not since she was a baby girl, being cared for by the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable" (*Beloved* 51). Vickroy discerns that the scene signifies the return of the repressed—"Once the young woman Beloved returns in the flesh, Sethe does not immediately identify the connection between them. This connection is felt in her body; the pseudo birth-water breakage manifests unconscious memory and Sethe's reemerging symbiotic bond with Beloved" (180). Involuntary memory revives the repressed memory, which is the 'literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits' (Caruth, "Introduction" 3). In *Beloved*, the unmanageable emergency for Sethe to urinate is like the effusion of involuntary memory. As the returning of the repressed memory, Sethe's bladder suddenly fills to capacity "for some reason she could not immediately account for" (*Beloved* 51). Moreover, "the water she voided was endless. [. . .] [A]nd there was no stopping now" (*Beloved* 51).

Perceiving the connection between Beloved and Sethe, Vickroy directly interrelates Beloved with involuntary memory: “She is envisioned as an *involuntary memory* because although she provides some measure of emotional fulfillment, she is also unsettling, confronting many of the characters with their past and the shame they endure in trying to survive” (180, emphasis mine). Indeed, Beloved’s appearance is like involuntary memory, which is unexpected and uncontrolled. The narrative of Beloved’s appearance—“A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (*Beloved* 50)—begins abruptly in the novel without any premonition. It interrupts the proceeding narrative of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver’s daily life just as the way the operation of involuntary memory intrudes into the subject’s consciousness. Furthermore, involuntary memory brings back the traumatic memory which the traumatized subject does not want to confront as similarly the urine of Sethe stimulated by Beloved “mak[es] a mudhole too deep to be witnessed without shame” (*Beloved* 51).

II. Center and Circumference: The Circular Narrative

Given its uncontrollability, involuntary memory, like Beloved, brings back the repressed memory into consciousness against the traumatized subject’s will. Therefore, as the repressed memory is evoked, the Freudian repression still works. Through the discussion of repression in the preceding chapter, we realize that in trauma narrative the traumatized subject evades or intentionally omits the central event. Moreover, it is noteworthy that, if the traumatized subject is forced to recount the center of her/his traumatic experiences, she/he resists unveiling it by circular narrative. Matus points out that in trauma narrative, “[t]hrough hints and

insinuations the narrative circles around its central unspeakable incident, enacting the symptoms of trauma in its own fragmentation and blockage” (108). As a result, one of the characteristics of trauma narrative is its circling style: the traumatized subject keeps talking about details which are not significant in traumatic experiences for her/his reluctance to dwell on the central event.

In *Beloved*, the characters’ narrative “enacts a circling or repetition around the traumatic event” (Matus 112). When her traumatic memory of Sweet Home has been evoked, Sethe first recollects not her children or the atrocities of slavery but the sycamores in the plantation. “It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that” (*Beloved* 6). On another scene, when Sethe tells Denver how she loves Beloved, what comes to her mind is not the scene in the woodshed. Instead, she recollects the headstone she selects for her daughter and how she trades sex with the engraver for engraving the word “Beloved” on the headstone. Sethe recalls the scene in detail: “The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips” (*Beloved* 4-5). When Denver asks Sethe to tell her what exactly happened at Sweet Home, Sethe answers her: “Nothing to tell except schoolteacher” (*Beloved* 36). However, when Sethe talks about schoolteacher, she does not mention how he teaches his nephews to write down the slave’s “animal characteristics” and orders them to suck her milk. Sethe just tells Denver some details about schoolteacher, how he looks like, and some trivialities of his ink and notebook (*Beloved* 36-7).

Paul D also dwells on his traumatic experiences in a circling style. In the conversation with Sethe, Paul D does not know how to convey in words his feelings of being traumatized. As a result, he turns to expatiate on the cocky appearance of a rooster called “Mister” (*Beloved* 71-2). “Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son of a bitch couldn’t even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was . . .” (*Beloved* 72). Paul D compares Mister’s confidence and freedom to his feelings of shame and helplessness aroused by the bit put in his mouth. Another case in point is Stamp Paid’s circular narrative when he tries to tell Paul D the truth of Beloved’s death. Stamp Paid encounters difficulty in narrating how Sethe gathers her children to the woodshed and cuts off Beloved’s throat. Therefore, he deviates from Beloved’s death and talks in detail about the blackberries he plucks for Denver, how precious they are, and how lavish the feast held by Baby Suggs for her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren (*Beloved* 156-57).

The most specific example of the characters’ circular trauma narrative in *Beloved* is the scene in which Paul D, after Stamp Paid shows him the newspaper clipping, asks Sethe the real reason of Beloved’s death. To answer Paul D’s question, Sethe begins to narrate her memories of Beloved. She tells him how Beloved learns to crawl and to eat solid food. She complains about how helpless she is at Sweet Home since she knows no woman who can teach her how to take care of her children. She even expatiates on the color and pattern of a piece of calico by which she wants to make a shift for her daughter. Sethe chatters on and on about all trivialities of Beloved except how she dies. Moreover, we should notice that, when Sethe responds to Paul D’s inquiry, her circular narrative corresponds with her movement in the kitchen, which also proceeds in a circling style:

She is spinning. Round and round the room. Past the jelly cupboard, past the window, past the front door, another window, the sideboard, the keeping-room door, the dry sink, the stove—back to the jelly cupboard. Paul D sat at the table watching her drift into view then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel. Sometimes she crossed her hands behind her back. Other times she held her ears, covered her mouth or folded her arms across her breast. Once in a while she rubbed her hips as she turned, but the wheel never stopped. (*Beloved* 159)

On this scene, Sethe walks and talks like a wheel, spinning and non-stop. Sethe's circling movement in the kitchen embodies her circular narrative and both of them bewilder Paul D.

It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction, which might have helped his head. [. . .] He caught only pieces of what she said—which was fine, because she hadn't gotten to the main point—the answer to the question he had not asked outright, but which lay in the clipping he showed her" (*Beloved* 161).

Paul D does not realize that Sethe will never get to the main point. The main point, the answer to Paul D's question, is the center of Sethe's traumatic experiences and she always lingers on the circumference, resisting going into the center. Her mental and physical movement both circle around because she cannot speak out her central secret to answer the question—if she really kills Beloved. "Circling, circling, now she was gnawing something else instead of getting to the point" (*Beloved* 162). Lorraine Liscio, in "*Beloved's* Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk," suggests that "Sethe's

circling bespeaks her inability to order a literate cause/effect sequence in her crazed and horrifying act. [. . .] Sethe is not the only one destined to a circuitous mode of storytelling. Indeed, all the characters are” (38). Valerie Smith points out that given “the space between ‘experience’ and narrative intervention” (350), the characters’ trauma narrative “can only ‘circle’” (350).

In “Anything Dead Coming Back to Life Hurts: Circularity in *Beloved*,” Philip Page probes into Sethe’s trauma narrative and concludes that “[t]he image of circularity controls the crucial scene of *Beloved*. The scene occurs [. . .] when Sethe tries to explain to Paul D why she had to kill her infant daughter. That shocking act, Sethe’s motivations behind it, the memory of it, and Paul D’s struggle to understand it form the heart of the novel” (134-35). In fact, Sethe is well aware of her circling movement and circular narrative because she realizes that she can never directly tell Paul D the truth of Beloved’s death. “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off—she could never explain” (*Beloved* 163).

After reading *Beloved*, readers may find the whole narrative of the novel is as circular as Sethe’s trauma narrative. As Page suggests, “circles and circle metaphors dominate the novel” (135). The plot circles around Sethe’s infanticide and the story “begins and ends with Beloved, whose name envelops the text” (Horvitz 157). Page compares the narrative of *Beloved* to the one of Sethe’s: “The novel is like the circle Sethe spins, collecting, omitting, repeating the fragments. [. . .] The narrator knows the whole story, but, since the characters have trouble confronting the past, the narration must be presented in overlapping pieces” (140). The narrative of the novel

focuses on one character's flashback, shifts unexpectedly to another, circles back with more information, then turns away, then circles back, and so on. In *Beloved*, the whole narrative is a big circle enclosing the small circles of the characters' trauma narrative.

III. The Unspoken Scene

Sethe's circular narrative arises from her inability to recount the scene of Beloved's death. In fact, this crucial scene is not fully represented in any character's narration, not even in the narrative of the novel. Sethe's killing Beloved is the center of the whole story. However, the chapter consisting of this central event is only six pages and the narrator of the event is not Sethe herself but the omniscient narrator. The narrative of this chapter is represented as a live show in which the omniscient narrator's viewpoint follows the four white men—"schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff" (*Beloved* 148)—who come to 124 for Sethe and her children. The narrator describes in detail how carefully the white men approach the house. They see Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs and both of them act crazy to them. Stamp Paid is "grunting—making low, cat noise like" (*Beloved* 149) and Baby Suggs is "standing stock-still—but fanning her hands as though pushing cobwebs out of her way" (*Beloved* 149). When the white men walk into the woodshed—"[i]nside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other" (*Beloved* 149). The blood-soaked child is Beloved and her throat has been cut off before the narrator's viewpoint, following the white men, moves into the woodshed. The crucial scene of Beloved's death has ended before the narrator leads the reader to

witness it.

The whole novel, from the beginning to the end, from characters to the omniscient narrator, does not represent the scene of Beloved's death. Readers do not "hear" (from the characters' narrative) or "see" (from the omniscient narrator's viewpoint) the crucial scene in the woodshed. This scene, the center of Sethe's traumatic experience, is omitted from all possible narrative. It is the absence, the gap, which signifies the unspeakable center of traumatic experiences. Vickroy notes that the silence on the central event can represent "a traumatic gap, a withholding of words because of terror, guilt, or coercion" (187). It is "a strong 'presence' in *Beloved*, connected to repression, isolation, loss, and hidden knowledge; this is a heretofore unspoken history" (Vickroy 187). Schopp also regards the gap in narrative as a characteristic of Morrison's works:

In fact, gaps in information, the disjuncture between proairetic sequence and hermeneutic codes [. . .] seem to characterize much of Morrison's novel. In Morrison's narrative, the reader may recognize that an event or sequence of events is significant; however, her reader often lacks the hermeneutic codes—the plot [. . .] that enable a determination of signification. (212)

With the unspoken scene in the woodshed, the narrative in *Beloved* not only represents the withholding form of trauma narrative but also quickens the reader's imagination. Through the discussion in the preceding chapter, we realize that trauma narrative is like a box of jigsaws which is short of the central part. The center of traumatic experiences might never be present in trauma narrative and it has only to be completed by the reader's imagination. In *Beloved*, readers do not hear or see the

crucial scene of Sethe's killing Beloved, hence they have to imagine what exactly happened in the woodshed of 124. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison says:

The language has to be quiet; it has to engage your participation. [. . .]
It is not just about telling a story; it is about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel the experience. (125, Tate's explanation)

On Beloved's death, the narrator's absence invites the reader's presence. In fact, readers' imagining the crucial scene is more effective than merely "seeing" it through the omniscient narrator's viewpoint. Matus emphasizes that, in *Beloved*, the "[t]he narrative choice to handle the novel's central incident this way has the effect of making the reader understand more compelling Sethe's horrific actions" (107). Through the full play of imagination, readers are closer to the traumatized characters because the horror and helplessness of being traumatized can be better imagined than described.

IV. Time and Trauma

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth explores the characteristic of trauma in terms of the passage of time. She indicates that "[t]raumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it;

that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of *belatedness*” (91-92, emphasis mine). Caruth’s concept of “belatedness” in trauma derives from Freud, who, in *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, suggests that “a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action*” (356, Freud’s emphasis).³ According to Freud, trauma is not formed immediately when the subject experiences the traumatic event. It is developed during the passage of time, in a “deferred action.” An event becomes traumatic not in the very moment it occurs but in a belated and complicated process in which repression, involuntary memory, repetition compulsion, and trauma narrative interplay.⁴

The time arrangement in the narrative of *Beloved* corresponds to the deferred action in trauma. The opening of *Beloved* is set in the eighteenth years after Beloved’s death, which happens in the middle of the story, not in the beginning or the end. For Morrison, even “the *in medias res* opening” of *Beloved* is “excessively demanding” (“Unspeakable” 228), she is committed to it because such opening can arrange the time line in narrative to represent the belatedness in trauma. Readers, at the opening of *Beloved*, are thrown into 124, a house haunted by a baby ghost, without knowing what happened in the past. Through the characters’ flashbacks, readers belatedly reconstruct the story and grasp the significance of Beloved’s death as the traumatic center of the novel. It is a deferred action similar to trauma

³ Freud uses the term “nachträglich” constantly to explain how memory alters during the passage of time. In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis translate this German term into “après-coup,” a French term denoting “deferred action.” According to Laplanche and Pontalis, “après-coup” means “the subject revises past events at a later date (nachträglich), and that it is this revision which invests them with significance and even efficacy or pathogenic force” (112). However, “[i]t is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience” (Laplanche and Pontalis 112).

⁴ The concept of “repetition compulsion” will be discussed in the next chapter.

narrative by which the traumatized subject belatedly recognizes the event as traumatic and understands its significance in her/his personal history.

On the other hand, since the event becomes traumatic in a deferred action, it might be endowed by the traumatized subject with a new meaning. During the passage of time, the traumatized subject's fresh experiences may revise her/his traumatic memory and, in the better way, relieve her/his pain. In *Beloved*, Sethe resents her husband, Halle, for his absence in their runaway. She believes that their runaway fails because Halle does not join her with their children in the cornfield. Sethe cannot forgive Halle until Paul D tells her the thing she does not know—Halle disappears because he goes insane after seeing the nephews of schoolteacher suck Sethe's milk in the barn (*Beloved* 68-9). In a deferred action, Paul D's information revises a part of Sethe's traumatic memory and releases Halle from Sethe's resentment.

Another characteristic related to time in trauma is the disorder of tense in the traumatized subject's life. Matus characterizes trauma as "a disease of time" because "[t]he past is not known *as* the past. Out of its place and time, it intrudes into the present, returning in exactness and literalness, pristine and ungrasped by memory" (Matus 24, Matus' emphasis). The traumatic experiences, without being assimilated into the traumatized subject's personal history, fix on her/his psychic life and repeatedly intrude into her/his consciousness. As Caruth suggests, the traumatic event is haunting with "its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" ("Introduction" 3, Caruth's emphasis). The repeated return of the repressed interrupts the traumatized subject's daily life and thus divides it into two worlds. "Many traumatized persons [. . .] experience long periods of time in which they live,

as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 448). Between the two worlds, the traumatized subject “switches from one to the other without synchronization because he is reporting not a sequence but a *simultaneity*” (Langer 95, emphasis mine).

The narrative of *Beloved* represents the “simultaneity” in the traumatized subject’s life, the co-existence of two incompatible worlds. By means of the *in medias res* opening, the narrative intertwines the proceeding plot with the characters’ flashbacks. The co-existence of the present and the traumatic past in *Beloved* corresponds with “a permanent duality, not exactly a split or a doubling but a parallel existence” (Langer 95), which the traumatized subject experiences in her/his life. As Page notes, Morrison in her novels “treats time not chronologically, but as a divided, multilayered dimension” (33). In *Beloved*, Sethe’s traumatic memory of Baby Suggs, Halle, schoolteacher, and Beloved repeatedly returns and intrudes into her consciousness. It seems that she lives simultaneously at 124 (the present) and at Sweet Home (the past). According to Matus, Sethe lives with the unintegrated traumatic memory and she “finds the past welling up in her daily experience as if it were happening again; she lives the past as if it were the present. What the trauma of slavery has done is to disturb linearity and chronology. Time itself is haunted, and narrative denies history, which is an ordering of time” (111).

The fragmented narrative in *Beloved* not only represents the disorder of tense in the traumatized subject’s life but also unfolds the discontinuity of traumatic memory. As discussed in the opening of this chapter, traumatic memory, unlike narrative memory, “is not transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle

and an end (which is characteristic for narrative memory)” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 448). In traumatic memory, “as opposed to narrative memory, linear chronology collapses. Time becomes fragmented and uncontrollable” (Hirsch 103). In *Beloved*, in order to represent Sethe and other characters’ discontinuous traumatic memory, Morrison has to “jettison linear or chronological approaches to narrative” (Vickroy 179). Matus also discerns that in *Beloved* the characters’ narrative “conveys the nature of the traumatic past through its discontinuity and fragmentation” (Matus 111).

Narrative memory is “the action of telling a story” (Janet 661), a movie with the linear and fluent plot. On the other hand, the discontinuous traumatic memory is like a “series of still snapshots” (Herman 175). Herman indicates that traumatic memory is “encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images. [. . .] The intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality” (Herman 38). According to Herman, trauma narrative, the narrative of the “static and unintegrated” (Vickroy 188) traumatic memory, is like the exhibition of those snapshots. Indeed, in *Beloved*, the characters’ fragmentary and non-linear trauma narrative shows us the scene rather than the story of their traumatic past. We see the divided yet interrelated pictures in which Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, Stamp Paid and all other blacks are bound, abused, raped, and even killed. Morrison’s *Beloved* is like an album containing the characters’ narrative pictures related to their trauma and the atrocities in slavery.

Moreover, in the picture of trauma narrative, time is confused but space is distinct. Traumatic memory is “timeless” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 448) since trauma disrupts and blurs the linear time (Matus 111). However, the image of the

place stays firmly in traumatic memory. Traumatic memory is like an undated picture, we see the people and the place but we do not know when it was taken. In *Beloved*, as Mobley suggests, the narrative “meanders through time, sometimes circling back, other times moving vertically, spirally out of time and down into *space*” (192, emphasis mine). Sethe tells Denver that, about her memories, she has no trust in “time,” yet the “place” is always there:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in 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. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the places where it happened.” (*Beloved* 35-6)

V. Figuration

Another noteworthy characteristic of trauma narrative is its symbolic language. If trauma narrative is like a series of snapshots, then the symbolic language used by the traumatized subject works as the *punctum* in the picture, an meaningful “addition” (Barthes 55) which is “personal” and “metonymic” and thus has “a power of expansion” (Barthes 45).⁵ Considering the struggle of force between repression and

⁵ Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, uses the term *punctum* to signify the element in pictures which “will break (or punctuate) the *studium*” (26). *Studium* is “a kind of education (knowledge and civility, ‘politeness’)” (Barthes 28) which provides information for the spectator to understand the background of the picture—the place, the people, and the circumstance. Barthes says, “To recognize the *studium*

evocation, Freud argues that the repressed memory does not “enter consciousness smoothly and unaltered; it must always put up with distortions” (*Moses* 95). In “Repression,” Freud indicates that the return of the repressed exits in a “substitutive formation” through the process of “condensation” and “displacement” (154-56). Lacan further classifies the Freudian condensation as “metaphor” and displacement as “metonymy” (“The Agency” 160). The traumatized subject, given her/his inability to completely recount the repressed memory, adopts the symbolic language in her/his trauma narrative, which consists of metaphor (condensation) and metonymy (displacement). In *Beloved*, the character and the omniscient narrator also use metaphor and metonymy to connote the unspeakable trauma. While reading *Beloved*, “the reader is confronted with a network of allusions from which full meaning is withheld, with constant intimations that sinister, even traumatic reference lie beyond them” (Ferguson 112). The most specific example is the image of “a chokecherry tree” used by Sethe to represent the scars on her back.

“What tree on your back? Is something growing on your back? I [Paul D] don’t see nothing growing on your back.”

“It’s there all the same.”

“Who told you that?”

“Whitegirl. That’s what she called it. I’ve never seen it and never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree.

Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But

is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intention, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them [. . .]” (27-8). *Punctum*, contrary to the *studium*, is out of information, it is a detail, a partial object, which “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow” (Barthes, 26). It is the spectator’s interest in the unnoticed part of the picture which varies from person to person. For Barthes, *punctum* is a detail but “it fills the whole picture” (45). The picture with the *punctum* is “no longer ‘anything whatever’” (Barthes 49) since it arouses the spectator’s curiosity; it pricks the spectator and disturbs her/him.

that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know.” (*Beloved* 15-6, explanation mine)

The chokecherry tree symbolizes both the scars on Sethe’s back and the traumatic experiences she has undergone. The tree, like the traumatic memory, is not visible for Sethe but it truly exists. Vickroy regards Sethe’s scars as “a metaphor for the push and pull of traumatic memory—knowing and not knowing. She knows it is there, but it is numb and she cannot see it” (183). Trauma fixes on Sethe’s psychic life as if the chokecherry tree fixes on her back. Moreover, Sethe suggests that the tree “could have cherries” (*Beloved* 16) during the passage of time, which signifies the “deferred action” of traumatic memory.

Being questioned about Beloved’s death, Sethe confesses in her mind that she decides to kill her children because “when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono” (*Beloved* 163). The hummingbird’s sticking their needle beaks into Sethe’s hair symbolizes Sethe’s mental state overwhelmed by schoolteacher’s appearance. Paul D hides what he cannot say in “that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (*Beloved* 72-3). The tobacco tin symbolizes the space of the unconscious in which the traumatized subject represses her/his traumatic memory. The similar symbol reappears when Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter. The omniscient narrator uses the image of casket to represent the unconscious and the jewels inside are Sethe’s precious memories about Beloved:

A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled

before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weights. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp at a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along. (*Beloved* 176)

Sweet Home, the name of the plantation, is also meaningful. Home, for human beings, is the origin of memories and, for Sethe and Paul D, Sweet Home is the origin of their traumatic memory. The name “sweet” also connotes the traumatized subject’s ambivalent attitudes to repress and to repeat the traumatic experience at the same time. As Denver says, “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” (*Beloved* 13).

The word, or we should say the name, in *Beloved* that is the most meaningful is Beloved. As a word, it is omnipresent in the novel. It is the word that the preacher says at the funeral of “the crawling already? baby,” the word Sethe hears and have it engraved on her daughter’s headstone. It is the word the mysterious girl names herself, it is the word in the epigraph of the novel, and it is the word Morrison names her work. As a name, the identity of the name’s owner is undefined, and thus full of figurative senses. The plot of the novel does not clearly represent who Beloved is. The characters are not sure whether Beloved is the incarnation of the baby ghost or a runaway slave who “had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purpose” (*Beloved* 119). After Beloved disappears, Paul D talks to Denver about her sister yet both of them cannot define who Beloved is:

They were both silent for a moment and then he [Paul D] said, “Uh, that girl. You know. Beloved?”

“Yes?”

“You think she sure ’nough your sister?”

Denver looked at her shoes. “At times. At times I think she was—more.” (*Beloved* 266, explanation mine)

Readers, even after finishing reading the novel, cannot ascertain Beloved’s identity. Critics also encounter the difficulty identifying the mysterious girl. Most of them assume that Beloved is Sethe’s daughter but some have different answers. Iyunolu Osagie, with textual evidence, reveals the many possibilities of Beloved’s identity. On her consideration, Beloved could be “a ghost returned in human form” (426), the “devil-child” in African fable (427-28), or a strange woman unrelated to Sethe (431). Unlike other critics, Elizabeth House insists that Beloved is a runaway slave who has been shipped with her mother from Africa to America (18). Deborah Horvitz argues that Beloved is both Sethe’s daughter and her ‘African mother’ (158), an “inter-generational” and “inter-continental” figure who teaches Sethe “memories and stories about her matrilineal ancestry” (158). Although most critics try to determine who Beloved is, for Margaret Atwood, it is impossible to ascertain Beloved’s identity because “there’s a lot more to Beloved than any character can see, and she manages to be many things to several people. She is a catalyst for revelations as well as self-revelation” (35). Linda Krumholz also considers Beloved as “a trickster figure who defies narrative closure or categorization, foreclosing the possibility of a complete ‘clearing’ for the reader” (397).

Beloved, with her undefined identity and ghost image, represents many

characteristics of trauma. By writing *Beloved*, Morrison wants to re-create the world of the blacks haunted by their traumatic experiences in slavery. She adopts many images to represent the unspeakable trauma and in the center of them, the most significant symbol of them, is Beloved. She is endowed with the characteristics of trauma—the unspeakable past, the return of the repressed, the deferred action, the involuntary memory, etc. As discussed, Beloved is envisioned as the involuntary memory by whose appearance the characters' traumatic memory is evoked.

Beloved's return in the flesh also represents the "simultaneity" in the traumatized subject's life because "in this world, ghosts are not only present but taken for granted; in this world, the past coexists with the present" (Phelan 230). Beloved's identity cannot be pinned down, as the traumatic experience cannot find a place in the traumatized subject's personal history. As Vickroy suggests, "Beloved represents the belatedness and dislocation of traumatic memory, which creates gaps in knowledge" (188). In the last chapter of *Beloved*, the omniscient narrator, as the chorus in Greek tragedies, narrates the epilogue and comments on Beloved: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (*Beloved* 274). The omniscient narrator's comment on Beloved corresponds with the characteristics of trauma she represents: traumatic memory is repressed—"no one is looking for her," and unspeakable—"don't know her name."

In *Beloved*, Morrison centers the narrative on Beloved and adopts narrative strategies to create a labyrinth of trauma narrative in which the reader gets lost but finally realizes her/his job is not to find the way into the center where she/he has already

been from the beginning.