

CHRONOTOPES OF TRAUMA IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Abstract. Trauma, a phenomenon which is too shocking to be fully registered upon its occurrence and which, instead, only manifests belatedly and somewhere else in intrusive images and compulsive re-enactments offers specific challenges to traditional notions of referentiality. This paper seeks to explore how traumatic experiences, such as The Middle Passage, slavery and racism can be represented, read, and perhaps worked through in terms of temporal and spatial references. By reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this paper seeks to demonstrate that trauma is represented, acted out, and possibly worked over, not just through references to time but also to space – geographical, bodily, and textual. Through the analysis of the configuration of space/place in Morrison's *Beloved*, this paper reads trauma using Caruth's theorizations and Bakhtin's notion of chronotope. It offers an innovative reading of *Beloved* and argues that Morrison's novel is a memory-site for remembering and bearing witness to the past traumatic event, a novel that attempts to communicate the spatiotemporally disruptive force of trauma. Finally, this paper aims to contribute to literary trauma studies by reconsidering and expanding the idea of representing trauma by using the concept of chronotope.

Keywords: *Beloved*, trauma, space, African American historical novel, chronotope

INTRODUCTION

Morrison's *Beloved* is a story of both individual and collective pain and triumph resonates typically with the African American experience and human experience in general. My interest on this topic comes from the fact that she doesn't write about normality but rather about the complexity of emotions and behaviour. She dares to speak out the "unspeakable" and "rips the veil" on the hidden realities of sore ordeals. Bound by the paradox of human behaviour

(good people committing horrific acts), Morrison's characters embrace their transgression and then transcend them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While reviewing the literature on Morrison's *Beloved*, I noticed that researchers have not investigated the temporal and spatial configurations of trauma. Keith Eldon Byerman sees that Morrison's narrative reveals the past by breaking through repression and by reconstituting communities and individual identities based on revelation and witness. (*Beyond Realism* 1990, 72) Angel Otero Blanco claims that "*Beloved* is connected not only with certain individuals but also with a whole society's past which must be socially remembered" ("The African Past in America" 2000, 145). Ashraf H. Rushdy argues that despite the dangers of remembering the past, African American artists have insistently based a large part of their aesthetic ideal on precisely that activity and she gives Morrison as an illustration on her idea for she considers her both a participant and theorist of this black aesthetic of remembering. ("Daughters Signifyin(g) History" 1992, 570). In this paper, I offer an innovative strategy of reading trauma in Morrison's *Beloved* by examining the temporal and spatial configuration of trauma using Caruth's and Bakhtin's theories of trauma and chronotope respectively.

THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL CONFIGURATIONS OF TRAUMA

Beloved (1987) underlines that the dramatic historical background of slavery may acquire an empowering role. It's the story of a mother who has killed her daughter to save her from slavery and who suffered the worst for this but ultimately managed to survive and grow up inscribing her new self. *Beloved* devotes its pages to a portrayal of the process of an individual and collective battle against

the effects of slavery, the struggle to be the definer instead of being just the defined. The novel's value lies in the fact that it brings consolation to the broken heartstrings rather than attempts to fossilize the distress of the past. The appearance of the ghost figure, Beloved, is both traumatic and mournful. Sethe articulates herself loudly when she mourns her past loudly. Hence, *Beloved* appears to be a proper illustration of the impulse of trauma and mourning leading to self-regeneration.

Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma in terms of time and space is a significant starting point to study Morrison's *Beloved*. She temporalises and spatialises traumatic experience when she links the phenomenon of trauma to time and space in her definition. Disruption, displacement, and relocations are temporal and spatial ways of representing trauma. This paper's focus on references to time and space is a contribution to Caruth's (re)quest for a new way of reading, for finding new ways of listening to trauma. In Morrison's *Beloved* The protagonists' physical and mental space is dominated by a historical trauma that changes the way the flow of time and the concepts of space and place are perceived. The configuration of places in Morrison's novel reflects the' traumatized minds of her protagonists as well as their social and political circumstances. The fictional places that Morrison creates mirror the protagonists' traumatised minds and their physical and psychological journey on the path of working through historical trauma. The chronotopes in *Beloved* "are experienced as metonymies of the oppressive and traumatizing social and cultural system that dominates the lives of the protagonists." (Lonien 2009, 12)

Morrison's *Beloved*, the focus of this paper, interrogates national identity and reconstructs social memory. She represents key moments of African American's history starting with slavery and its aftermath, moving on to the Harlem Renaissance and to the time of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. In rendering these forgotten histories, Morrison imagines as well as repatterns actual and fictional materials to re-enact and re-construct the reality of a historical past that might not otherwise be reached. Morrison, it

could be argued, has turned into a historian of sorts attempting to unearth the forgotten and repressed past of the African Americans. The reconstruction of the African Americans' social memory and their traumatic past reflects the political and therapeutic nature of her trilogy. Her novel is an example of how the chronotope of trauma is imaginatively expressed and configured.

Beloved's traumatic memory and the space where she experienced her traumas and suffering are inextricably linked. In using *Beloved's* deeply spatial and physical memories from inside the slave ship, Morrison takes the reader back to the Middle Passage to witness a buried and silent history. The chronotope of the Middle Passage reflects the spatial parameters of the experience on the slave ship. The vivid details of narrowness, heat and darkness on the slave ship are recollected through *Beloved's* traumatized body. "*Beloved's* repeated assertion that "all of it is now" points to the collapsing of the spaces of past and present in the mind of the traumatized girl and to the impossibility of the Middle Passage to be mourned and then put aside." (Lonien 2009, 72)

A glance at the space-time dimension in *Beloved* can also be understood as a study of its *chronotope*, a concept I will utilize throughout this paper. The spatial configuration of the markers of trauma is both temporal and geographical. They fuse into what Bakhtin has called 'the chronotope' or fusion of time and space. Bakhtin defines the chronotope as follows:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture.¹ In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (*The Dialogic Imagination* 1981, 84-5)

This tension between a compulsive return to and return of historical traumas and a productive engagement with the past is what Morrison captures in her concept of rememory, in which the prefix suggests both repetition and re-vision. Revisiting her past in response to *Beloved's* incessant questions enables Sethe to engage with it in a (re)constructive way, to see some things in a new light and to remember others that she had simply occluded. However painful, being haunted ultimately seems a necessary condition: more than a source of suffering that binds negatively to the past, it can also be a way of poetically and politically re-visioning a traumatic history and reflecting on how it impacts diasporic identity. (Chassot 2018, 27)

The quotation below reflects how time is spatialized in Morrison's *Beloved*:

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 know, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened' (*Beloved* 1988, 35-36).

Through this monologue, Sethe highlights the concept of "rememory", which reflects in turn the way Morrison approaches the past as a persistent powerful influence in the present. The above quotation demonstrates that Sethe's memories are tangible structures, spaces she can enter like a room: "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." (*Beloved* 1988, 36)

Morrison's spatializing of time allows her to move the task of remembering trauma from the individual psyche to the public sphere, which in turn underlines the significance of public remembrance for the African American community. Place and

trauma are inextricably connected and Morrison uses this connection to portray her protagonists' traumatic memories, which in turn represent a larger historical trauma. The historical past is presented in *Beloved* as trauma of individual and collective dimensions. Sethe's (his)story stands for the (hi)story of American slaves because as Baby Suggs says: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (*Beloved* 1988, 5).

The African Americans' trauma originally started with 'The Middle Passage' which marked the beginning of African enslavement in America. This traumatic historical event is at the heart of *Beloved* and the root cause for the protagonists' traumas and suffering. While Sethe's trauma is not only the result of her killing of her daughter but "her lifelong exposure and subjection to slavery, to which her desperate act was a response", (Chassot 2018, 24) the historical trauma of African- Americans is caused by the Middle Passage, which lies hidden in the deepest recesses of communal memory.

In *Beloved*, Morrison opens up spaces to commemorate the silenced history of African American trauma through rememory" which is a hybrid of remember and memory. The fact that the memory of Sethe remains the same over time, it keeps haunting her and her family. This demonstrates that *Beloved* is not merely about remembering trauma but also about the problems of expressing it in words. Cathy Caruth defined trauma as an event that is so unexpected and shocking that cannot be fully assimilated or integrated in the consciousness as it occurs but it returns belatedly through repetitions flashbacks and nightmares. Trauma disrupts the cognitive, linguistic and time structure of the mind. Hence, the failure of the traumatized subject to speak or communicate trauma simply. Sethe's awareness of the past troubles her mind. Although she works "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately, her brain was devious." (*Beloved* 6) "But her 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* 1988, 6/78)

Another significant chronotope in *Beloved* is the South. Liam Kennedy argues that “The South often plays an important role as an imaginary homeplace in African-American literature with a primary Northern urban setting.” (Kennedy 2000, 58) In *Beloved*, the South has both a positive and a negative connotation. Its positive meaning derives from being the home of the protagonists and hence they have a feeling of nostalgia towards it but its negative meaning stems from being the place of their trauma, torture, oppression and racism.

The temporal and spatial aspects of the notion of trauma is a topic which is worthy of pursuing. Starting out from Caruth’s and Freud’s contentions about the dislocation inherent in traumatic experience, this paper proposes that references to time and space image the traumatized mind, and that trauma should be read for disruptions and dislocations in terms of these temporal and spatial references respectively. Trauma has a time of its own, “trauma’s time,” as Aimee Pozorski calls it, the “belatedness of trauma itself” (2006, 71). Traumatic reference indicates a complicated relation to remembering the past, temporalizing representation.

The protagonists undertake a journey of remembrance back to their southern repressed roots. “If the characters in *Beloved* are motherless in the literal sense of the word, they are also motherless metaphorically, cut off from their traumatizing but also identity-forming roots in the South.” (Lonien 2009, 33) The journey back to the Southern roots is painful. Karin Luisa Badt argues “Given the atrocities in Afro-American history, to return to one’s ‘roots’ has the psychic resonance of returning to a subjugated position: Although the mother’s body, as the site of history, is made to signify anew [...] it is also the trace of an unbearable past.” (Badt 1995, 575) However, because the South is the site of black identity formation, remembrance of the Southern past as trauma is essential for the protagonists’ identity.

Nostalgia or “the longing to return to a lost place” is a major theme in *Beloved*. (Su 2005, 3) Both Sethe and Paul D envision Sweet Home as such a lost place, a lost home which they feel connected

to despite the traumas they experienced there. Morrison reflects on the present and attempts to interpret it using the nostalgia for places of the past. Sethe's longings constitute significant parts of her memory and experience. Thus, the house becomes a chronotope in which "Sethe's psychological hypertrophy is personified, while the heaviness of the memory that pursues her obtains a real form." (Velinova 2009, 4) When at the end of the novel Paul D talks to Stamp Paid about the strange young woman who settled in Sethe's house, he says: "She reminds me of something. Of something I know, but I have forgotten." (*Beloved* 1988, 234)

Sweet Home is the place where Sethe and Paul D met. The ambivalence of this chronotope derives from being both a safe haven for the slaves living on it and at the same time a place for the ugly face of slavery. Sweet Home has two contradictory utopian and dystopian dimensions. Sethe is constantly plagued by intrusive memories of her time at the slave plantation, transporting her back to a past place and time. Her recollections of Sweet Home are vivid:

there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, 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. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. 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* 1988, 6)

The complex relationship between memory and nostalgia is exemplified through Sethe's memories of Sweet Home as a chronotope of trauma but also of beauty. Sethe remembers the lynchings, which are outweighed by the soothing images of Sweet Home's beautiful trees.

Sweet Home is an essential chronotope for the formation of Sethe's identity. "It serves as the locus of a common past for Sethe, Baby Suggs and Paul D, and therefore is a vital point of reference in

their common journey towards a retrieval of traumatic memory.” (Lonien 2009, 37) Sethe claims Sweet Home as their common ground, the place that they remember as home whether they want to or not: “She’s right, Sethe. It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home.’ He shook his head. ‘But it’s where we were,’ said Sethe. ‘All together. Comes back whether we want it or not’” (14). Sweet Home is for Sethe a point of reference against which she orients herself in the chaos and traumatic experiences of her life.

The school place in *Beloved* is another chronotope of trauma. It is not a place of shaping and opening up minds, but a place where the black race is brutally dehumanised. The Schoolteacher’s brand of racist pseudoscience is symbolized by his measuring string, used to systematically measure the slaves’ facial angles, head shapes and brain sizes to prove the supremacy of the white race and the inferiority of the black race. Paul D thinks of how he had fantasized about Sethe on Sweet Home and how the actual consummation of that desire has failed to live up to his fantasy. Sethe remembers deciding to marry Halle and asking Mrs. Garner if there would be a wedding for them. Mrs. Garner simply laughed in reply. As Sethe and Paul D separately reconstruct their pasts, Sethe’s unofficial marriage to Halle shows that the Garners did not consider their slaves worthy of actual marriage.

Sethe approaches Mrs. Garner, expecting female solidarity and understanding concerning her love for Halle: “She and Mrs. Garner were the only women there, so she decided to ask her” (*Beloved* 1988, 26). At this moment, historical reality disrupts the utopian female space of friendship in the kitchen and when Sethe asks “Is there a wedding?” (*Beloved* 1988, 26), Mrs. Garner just laughs at the slave woman’s naiveté. Sethe fails to transform the unhomely space of slavery into a home for her. This kitchen scene has a traumatogenic effect. Whereas it is not overtly brutal or violent, it testifies nevertheless to a form of “insidious” racist trauma, happening within the confines of the traditionally female identified domestic space. According to Laura Brown “insidious trauma” refers 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" ("Not Outside the Range" 1995, 107). These subtle mechanisms of trauma that often take place in the domestic sphere and which consist in verbal rather than physical violence have a tremendous impact on the psychic and emotional integrity and sanity of the protagonists. These mechanisms of trauma turn the domestic space unhomely.

CONCLUSION

In *Beloved*, Morrison temporalizes and spatializes trauma in order to negotiate ways of individual and collective identity formation. Places like Sweet Home and 124 Bluestone are used as metonymies for the protagonists' traumatized minds and their different ways of dealing with trauma. The protagonists' physical and mental space is occupied by historical traumas that prevent them from finding a place in the present without revisiting the places of their traumatic past.

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