

THE POWER OF TRAUMA BONDING

EMMA LAUGHLIN

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

A consistent theme in Toni Morrison's novels is the transcendence of racism through space and time. For years, people of color have experienced racism, prejudice, injustice and oppression and Morrison has been able to illustrate these experiences in her novels. The antagonists of these novels are not typically one individual, but rather, society who label our protagonists as "Other". According to Morrison, being seen as Other is a trauma, meaning, racism itself is considered trauma. The repercussions and trauma of racism can change the way people bond interpersonally. This can be seen especially in Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*.

Throughout the years, the definition of trauma has shifted from a general scope to an expansion of physical, mental, emotional experiences an individual or collective face. Though in the past it was identified merely as an injury to the body, through research in social, cognitive and cultural practices, trauma can now be identified as any damage that was inflicted on the body, mind or soul.

Collective trauma can alter the bonds made between two or more people. Specifically, insidious trauma, a concept identified by Maria Root, 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" (Brown, 107).

An example of insidious trauma can be found every day in the context of racism. Through research, I can make an argument that the trauma of racism throughout the times has reconfigured the Black collective's ability to bond, relate and love themselves and others. In

Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*, I can see the power that shared trauma has on the interpersonal and generational relationships between her characters.

BELOVED

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based on a real incident that occurred in 1856 where a fugitive slave killed her child when they were found. To save herself and the child from the brutalization of slavery, she slit the child's throat. Morrison reconstructs this occurrence in the eyes of Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, for readers to understand the real horrors and intentions of slavery. The purpose of this novel is to reclaim the unrecognized, inhumane past and to share this story with the future to ensure that history doesn't repeat itself (Laughlin, 5). It also illustrates how the trauma of the past can materialize in present-day relationships

Take the mother-daughter relationships in *Beloved* as an example of how the trauma of the past can either inhibit or empower the bonds between people. The cycle of oppression and violence that are central to this novel are passed from mother to daughter. In "Beloved: The Physical Embodiment of Psychological Trauma" Selfridge states, "Early in the novel, again returning to her own history, Sethe recounts the wrongful murder of her mother. In much the same way as the other traumatic incidents dealt with in the text, the violence of Sethe's past effectively taints her relationships with her daughters" (Selfridge, 70). From the beginning, Sethe is still immersed in the past. She thinks back to her time with her mother, seemingly becoming fixated on the past and neurotically begins folding blankets. The narrator states, "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" (Morrison, 79).

Sethe being immersed in the past intrudes on the present, affecting all of her interpersonal relationships, especially between her daughter Denver and Beloved. Sethe is a fiercely loving mother, to the point where she attempted killing her children to save them from a life of slavery. This revelation is perceived differently by Denver who says, "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (Morrison, 205). This quote exemplifies how Denver is unable to trust the woman who provides her only source of human interaction and love. Denver realizes that Sethe loves her, but because of her past actions she cannot help but feel afraid, especially after encountering Beloved whom she becomes infatuated with.

Denver thinks, "The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it and wanted Beloved to hate it too, although there was no chance of that at all. Beloved took every opportunity to ask some funny questions and get Sethe going...How did she know?" (Morrison, 74-75). Denver is jealous of the way that Sethe opens up to Beloved, but more so she is jealous that Beloved is so intrigued by Sethe and not her. She is no longer interested in recognition from her mother, but she is now interested in someone she had always confided in. She claims, "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk. The first thing I heard after not hearing anything was the sound of her crawling up the stairs. She was my secret company until Paul D came. He threw her out. Ever since I was little she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy. Me and her waited for him" (Morrison, 205). Here, we see that Beloved provides security and company for Denver, something that Sethe was unable to provide to her growing up in social isolation.

As the novel progresses, we begin to see how Sethe and Beloved's relationship becomes parasitic. The spiteful ghost is what enables Sethe to avoid her memories, instead, she chooses to tolerate Beloved rather than exorcise her. Rhodes explains, "Exorcism would require an examination of painful associations and though her brain deviously sends her snippets of memory, these snippets are less frightening than confronting the nexus, the core of her pain, her dead daughter, Beloved" (Rhodes, 1990). Though her presence was a necessary coping element, Beloved ultimately distracts Sethe from the reality of her living relationship with Denver (Laughlin, 8).

At the end of the novel when Sethe chases Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick and Beloved disappears, that is the moment Beloved understands Sethe for the infanticide. Beloved sees how much Sethe ferociously loves her other children. After the disappearance of Beloved, it is difficult for Sethe to come to terms with her absence as she still holds onto the unresolved trauma of losing her daughter not once, but twice now. Sethe reverts to her old ways of focusing on the past instead of the present (Laughlin, 8).

Beloved can be seen as the physical embodiment of trauma that encourages Sethe and Denver to process their past. The trauma of racism, slavery and motherhood envelopes Sethe and her living child, Denver. Selfridge explains the complex and conflicting relationships that occur between the women in *Beloved* as being "Reduced to less than human by the confines of slavery, these women have no identities outside of mother and daughters or slaves" (Liscio, 31). The confinement of self-identity and space is the result of Sethe's trauma, which furthermore created the complex and codependent relationships we see between the three women.

GOD HELP THE CHILD

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* there are multiple perspectives of adults who have encountered trauma in their lives whether it occurred through lost love, internalized racism, imprisonment or death. Through these perspectives, we see that it matters what happens to children, because they may never forget. Between protagonist Bride and Booker's trauma, we see that adult victims still carry the burden of the past no matter how much time has passed. Once they finally are honest and open about their grief, life continues, even granting them a child. According to Fatoumata Keita, "Above all, the story of a mother whose reluctance to accept her daughter's 'blue-black' colour and provide her with support and love, leads her to commit an abject crime. An innocent woman spends fifteen years in prison because of a false testimony of a little Black girl yearning for mother love and acceptance" (Keita, 2018). This tale displays that sharing trauma can be a beneficial, bonding experience rather than an inhibitor.

The dysfunction, grief and internalized racism that is apparent in Bride and Booker's family dynamics are indicators of how the trauma of the past can affect the identity of people. The cycle of repression and violence are also central to this novel, like we have seen in Morrison's other works. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison emphasizes how traumatic life experiences can strongly affect relationships intrapersonally and interpersonally forever.

The novel begins with Lula Ann Bridewell being born despite her mother, Sweetness' disdain. In the first chapter Sweetness says, "I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me... I know I went crazy for a minute because once -- just for a few seconds -- I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color" (Morrison, 5). The reality of the situation was that Sweetness' emotional abuse was a product of internalized racism

and classism, where she failed to provide Lula Ann with a supportive environment. Still, Sweetness believes that she was trying to protect her child from the insidious trauma of racism. She believed, “[Bride] Her color is a cross she will always carry” (Morrison, 7).

The mistreatment of Lula Ann during her childhood reaches its peak when the audience learns about her false accusation of Sofia Huxley. As a child, Lula Ann was a witness in a child molestation case and was asked to identify who in the courtroom molested children and she pointed at Sofia Huxley despite it being a lie. Bride lies because she is hungry for the validation and affection Sweetness shows at the trial, “I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I’ve never seen her smile before-- with mouth and eyes” (Morrison, 31). The combination of emotional abuse and colorism enabled by her mother encouraged Bride to lie on the stand, making herself a victim.

The only person Bride ever confided in was Booker Starbern, her boyfriend. One night she opens up about how as a child she witnessed her landlord Mr. Leigh sexually assaulting a young boy. She recounts this discussion saying, “That was one of the best talks we ever had. I felt such relief. No. More than that. I felt curried, safe, owned” (Morrison, 56). She internalizes and questions this memory, spiraling and questioning, “What if it was the landlord my forefinger was really pointing at in the courtroom?... Was I pointing to the idea of him?” (Morrison, 56). However, the night she opened up to Booker about the event, she never mentioned her inner-thoughts. She never mentioned she falsely accused Sofia Huxley.

After fifteen years Bride decides to confront her past and visit Sofia Huxley with gifts and money on the day she gets out of prison. Her insulting attempt for redemption leads to one of many conflicts she faces in the novel -- the abandonment of Booker who claims, “You not the

woman I want” (Morrison, 10). He runs away, wondering why she would ever buy gifts and give money to a predator. He feels deeply affected by Bride’s actions, for as a child, his brother was murdered by a pedophile. What he has yet to realize is that Huxley was never a predator at all, just a victim to Bride’s misconstrued trauma she witnessed as a child.

At the end of the novel, Bride is finally confronted by Booker and explains why she was visiting Sofia Huxley. She proclaims, ““I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn’t do any of that. I wanted to make amends but she beat the crap out of me and I deserved it... So my mother would hold my hand! And look at me with proud eye, for once” (Morrison, 153). Booker then follows suit and explains to Bride that he was so hurt by her actions because his brother was killed by a child rapist. They open up their childhood wounds of being secondary victims of sexual violence.

Each character finally finds their individual identity without trauma and abuse defining factors. After an argument with Queen who says, “She told her truth. What’s yours?...You lash Adam to your shoulders so he can work day and night to fill your brain. Don’t you think he’s tired? He must be worn out having to die and get no rest because he has to run somebody else’s life” (Morrison, 156) Booker is inspired to write to his deceased brother, “I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slave owner could have done it better” (Morrison, 161) whereas Bride, after being honest about her mistakes as a child, wakes up, “No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father” (Morrison, 162).

What materializes from Bride and Booker’s traumatic childhoods is the idea of optimism and new life as they expect a child together. The story comes full circle as the two secondary

victims of abuse learn how trauma bonding can be a healing mechanism and that trauma can be overcome. "A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath" (Morrison, 175).

"Morrison focuses on the need to put down the traumatic past, and the need of self-forgiveness and self-acceptance. She seems to hope that, despite the deep-rooted damage inflicted by child abuse, black individuals can overcome it and live the present fully and intensely" (Ramirez, 162). This is exactly why at the end of the novel we meet with Sweetness once again.

At the end of the novel her feelings of guilt and redemption resurface, "True. I was really upset, even repelled by her black skin when she was born and at first I thought of...No. I have to push those memories away-- fast. No point. I know I did the best for her under the circumstances" (Morrison, 177). The novel begins and ends with Sweetness to showcase Bride's growth and how her mother shaped her life. Sweetness once held so much power over Bride, but as Bride grows up and becomes pregnant she now knows how to overcome her mother's mistakes of the past & the importance she has in this future child's life (Laughlin, 4).

Morrison ties together the themes of race, sexuality, trauma and slavery in a modern novel. She underscores that what you do to children matters, and the unfortunate reality of children, especially children of color is that the effects can be crippling. Witnessing sexual assault and being discriminated against are just a few of the ways that children become victims at the hands of caregivers, teachers, lovers and authority.

Throughout the novel it was very easy to compare and contrast Bride and Booker's

stories. “The many parallels between Bride and Booker’s lives—including childhood trauma, and direct or indirect confrontations with accused child molesters—underscore how much they share” (Kakutani, 2015). This shared distress is the purpose of Morrison’s novel. She wanted the audience to understand the reality that many children of color face and how this neglect continuously shapes their lives.

In conclusion, *God Help the Child* does an effective job at describing to readers the many ways people cope and deal with trauma as children and how those mechanisms carry all the way into their adult lives. The message that can be gathered from the novel is this: to connect to other people, you must finally tell someone about your traumatic experiences. It relates to a quote from Morrison, “I tell my students, ‘When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game’” (Morrison). Morrison in her literary texts and interviews reveals to us that to be free is to free others and the easiest way to do that is through sharing your experience with others. Trauma can be a collective experience that we cannot and should not, pass on.

CONCLUSION

Laura K Hamillton wrote, “There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.” In Toni Morrison’s novels, we get a chance to identify with such a quote. Through all the years of racism, slavery, sexual violence, classism it is no wonder that people of color must identify with the collective. The collective identity provides those who suffer a way of suffering that doesn’t seem so lonely. The experiences of the Black American are shared experiences. At least once have they been ridiculed, oppressed,

ignored or marginalized in society. And for these folks, the wounds are insufferable, as Hamilton wrote.

Nonetheless, for years, Morrison has been able to write about these experiences in her novels, exploiting the reality of People of Color. These stories she writes aren't just fictional tales but historical fiction, realistic fiction that showcase the repercussions of traumatic, transcending racism. These fictional journey's not only provide readers imagery of what people did but of who they are. Her characters are more than surface level characters. They are deep, mesmerizing and real. Morrison accomplishes such with her characters because what she writes about isn't rewritten, reworked or false, it is very much so real. People of Color's trauma is real and the lasting effects of it can change the way people bond. Whether trauma prompts you to live a life in fear of the past or it tells you to reveal your truth, shared trauma has the power to bond individuals in reality and in the works of Toni Morrison.

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