

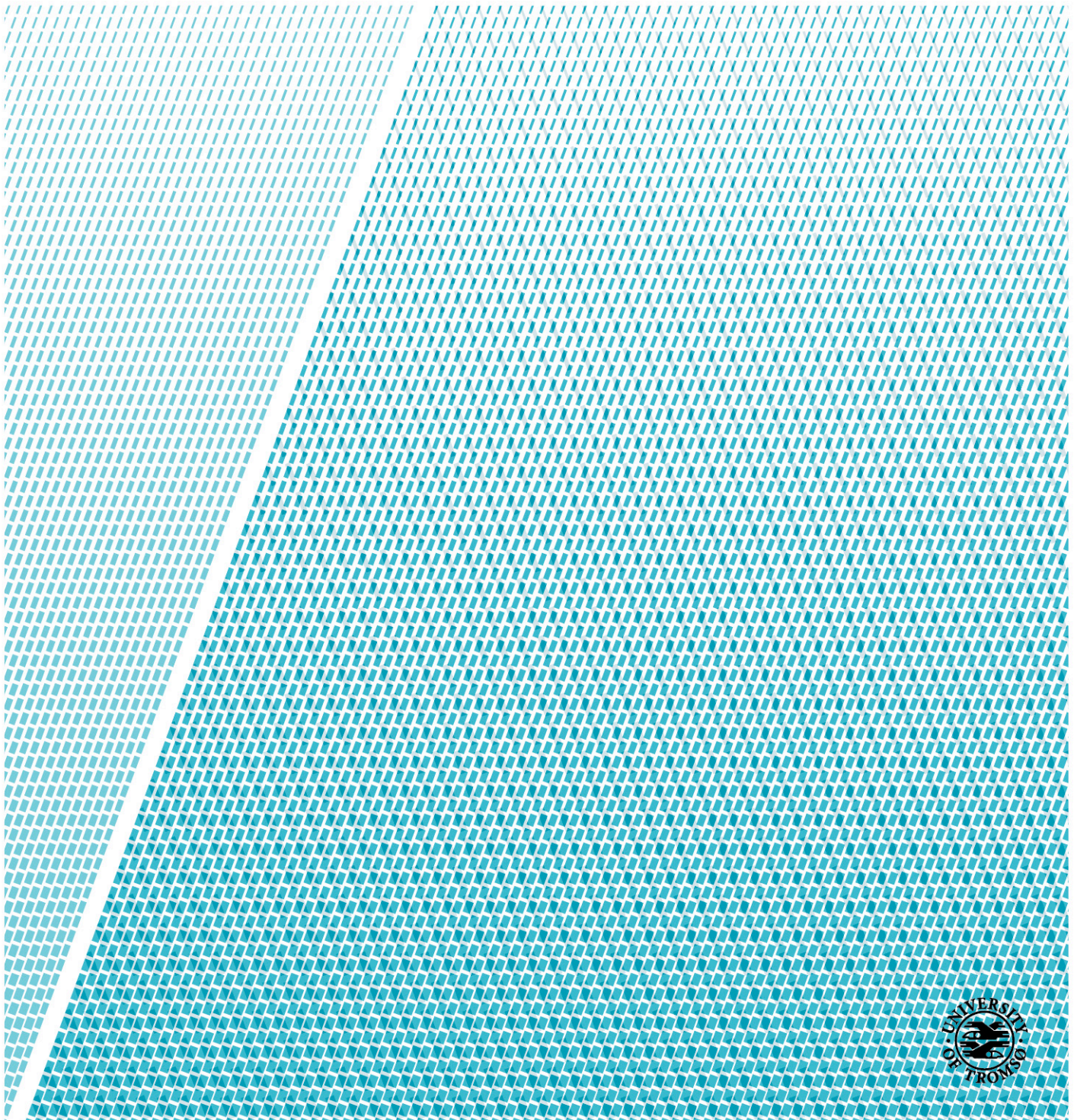


Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Orphanhood and trauma in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy and Beloved*

Nena K. Engen

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Abstract

The current thesis examines the themes trauma and orphanhood and how they are connected in Toni Morrison's two novels *A Mercy* (2008) and *Beloved* (1987), respectively. I will examine how traumatic experiences and the notion of both literal and cultural orphanhood affects the community, and how this has changed from the story in *A Mercy* being set in the late 17th century and to the story in *Beloved*, set in the last half of the 19th century. I will also explore different ideas of trauma and see what the repercussions are, and how the effects are dealt with both on a personal level as well as on the level of the community. The notions of trauma being examined is that of singular traumatic events and insidious trauma, a term coined by feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown. This study finds that from the onset of coming to America, marginalized groups such as women and African Americans have been orphaned, both literally and culturally. Orphanhood results in trauma, as being cut off from ones ancestral ties can be damaging to the self. Groups that have been exposed to insidious trauma, often internalize their oppressors' views, and in many cases end up becoming oppressors themselves. Morrison stresses the importance of community as a way to cope with trauma and to help remember the past in order to be able to move forward.

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Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up the fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth.

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Thesis statement and structure

This thesis will examine the themes trauma and orphanhood and how they are connected in Toni Morrison's two novels *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, respectively. I will examine how traumatic experiences and the notion of both literal and cultural orphanhood affects the community, and how this has changed from the story in *A Mercy* being set in the late 17th century and to the story in *Beloved*, set in the last half of the 19th century. I will also explore different ideas of trauma and see what the repercussions are, and how the effects are dealt with both on a personal level as well as on the level of the community. The historical background for each of the novels will be presented to give a better insight into the societies of the times the two novels are set.

In the introductory chapter the chosen themes will be accounted for and I will also give a brief background of Toni Morrison. This is to show how her own history has shaped both her fictional work and her theoretical non-fiction. I will also present some of her theoretical writing that is relevant to the selected themes and novels. The following two chapters will deal with each novel separately. Both of these chapters will have the same structure so as to make a comparison apparent. There will be an introduction to each chapter, followed by an historical background before a summary of each respective novel will be given. I will then explain the themes in regard to the novel in question, before looking at some of the characters and how they are affected by trauma and orphanhood. I will also examine how the community deals with these topics. By doing a close textual analysis of the two texts, the characters and the community will be studied in relation to the themes. The last chapter will be the conclusion where I will draw together my findings from the two novels and see if and how they differ from one another.

1.2 Trauma

Trauma can be defined in different ways. There is the concept of singular trauma, which “refers to a sudden and violent event for which the subject is not prepared” (Niemi 2). This notion of trauma comes from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he explains that “we describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. (...) The concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” (Freud et al. 29). Such “overwhelming traumatic material is not experienced, and this is the reason singular trauma repeats itself” (Niemi 11).

The feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown explains the need for a new definition of trauma other than *singular trauma* in her essay “Not outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”. She recalls having been called in as a witness in a court case where she was the therapist for a woman who had been abused by her stepfather over a long period of time. The stepfather was being sued so that Dr. Brown’s client could afford “to continue in therapy long enough to feel healed” (100), as she had suffered repetitive and continuous trauma and was clearly showing all of the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The defense attorney representing the stepfather, however, disagreed with Dr. Brown, arguing that “incest wasn’t unusual, wasn’t ‘outside the range of human experience’. How could it be called a trauma?” (101). Brown calls for the “need to expand and make more complex our definitions of psychic trauma and its wake” (107), and refers to a feminist therapist colleague of hers, Maria Root, who “has begun to develop the concept of ‘insidious trauma’” that 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” (107). Root’s model suggests “that for all women living in a culture where there is a high base rate of sexual assault and where such behavior is considered normal and erotic by men, as it is in North American culture, is an exposure to insidious trauma” (107). Not only are women who have experienced rape or other forms of sexual assaults exposed to insidious trauma, but women living in a society where this is considered normal, “have symptoms of rape trauma; we are hypervigilant to certain cues, avoid situations that we sense are high risk, go numb in response to overtures from men that might be friendly – but that might also be the first step toward our violation” (107). Women are not the only ones who are subjected to insidious trauma. Brown explains: “For each nondominant group in this society, similar phenomena operate: the African American who must constantly anticipate

a Howard Beach¹, the lesbian or gay man who must walk in fear of being murdered for whom they love (...). All of these people encounter insidious trauma” (107). Brown further calls for a need to admit

that it can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well, when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma. When we do so, and start to count the numbers of those for whom insidious trauma is a way of life, we must, if we have any morality, question a society that subjects so many of its inhabitants to traumatic stressors (108).

Brown explains that a major problem with defining trauma lies in who acts as the definer. Theories about, and definitions of trauma have generally been asserted by the dominant class, namely the “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other” (101). Typical traumatic experiences for the dominant group can be experiencing natural disasters such as avalanches or tsunamis; a car crash; or an airplane going down; as well as “war and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture” (101). In all of these cases, the victim is usually not blamed and the traumatic event is an event that takes place in the open. When it comes to sexual abuse and domestic violence, this is usually something that happens in secret, behind closed doors. The victims are often “assumed to have contributed to her problem” (102). Brown calls upon “a feminist analysis (...) to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm and at the hands of those who we love and depend upon” (102). Defining trauma in the dominant view “serves to uphold power relationships in a hetero-patriarchal society between women and men, between people of color and white people, between poor people and those with wealth” (105-106). What separates a feminist analysis of trauma from a “standard” analysis is that the idea of what is a “human experience” gets broadened to a more inclusive image, and not just the dominant, white, male notion of trauma.

In this thesis, trauma will primarily be defined in the way Laura Brown has defined insidious trauma: living in an environment in which there is a “constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma” (108). In *A Mercy*, we encounter characters of American, African, and European origin, with very different backgrounds. A motley crew, they have all experienced trauma before arriving at Jacob Vaark’s farm. For the women in particular, their new common ground also poses threats of rape, assault, and demise. Although the main

¹ An area in New York where unprovoked racial killings took place in 1986, making Howard Beach “into a metonym for racial hatred” (Roberts, nytimes.com)

characters in *Beloved* are primarily women, I will argue that the idea of insidious trauma applies to the whole African American community as they have suffered centuries of both constant risk and clear exposure to trauma.

1.3 Orphanhood

The definition of an orphan, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is either a person, and especially a child, who has lost both parents. It can also be a person deprived of “protection, advantages, benefits, or happiness previously enjoyed; [someone who] has been abandoned or ignored” (“Orphan”). In this thesis I will differentiate between the former definition, namely literal orphans; and the latter, cultural orphans. In the novels being studied we will encounter both literal orphans and cultural orphans, and I will examine the difference and/or similarities between the orphans in *A Mercy* and *Beloved*.

“In this country ‘American’ means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.” This very potent sentence was uttered by Toni Morrison in a 1992 interview with *The Guardian* (cited on wikiquotes.com). What struck me reading this was that it is true. If you are not white, you are *African-American*, *Native-American*, *Asian-American* - you are not *just* American. Morrison further explains:

To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective “white” or “black” or “colored” to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen (*Playing in the Dark* 47)

Why is there this distinction? It doesn’t matter if you are first or fifth generation American, as long as your family is not Caucasian white, your national label gets hyphenated. Everybody in the United States of America stems from immigrants. Everyone but the Native Americans, and even they get hyphenated. What made the Euro-Americans feel like they were the only true Americans, if that is what the pure title of “American” implies? I believe that we get at least part of the answer to these questions by examining the orphan trope in America.

In her book *Cultural Orphans in America*, Diana Loercher Pazicky states that the “orphan imagery is inseparable from familial imagery, and that the metaphorical meaning of orphanhood depends on the larger symbolic context of the family (...). In American history, the family is the paradigmatic institution that defines cultural values” (xiii). Pazicky further explains: “during the colonial period, the trauma of separation from England (...) created doubt among the Puritans about their mission in the New World and their status as God’s

adopted ‘children’ (...) and fostered an identification with political and spiritual orphanhood” (xiii). The Puritans feared orphanhood, as they were the “natural or adopted ‘children’ of that ‘family’” (xiii), and so they needed scapegoats “onto whom their identification with orphanhood could be placed” (xiii). The scapegoats for the newly settled Europeans became all the marginalized peoples who were different, and often poor, and it is clear that there were blatant economical reason for the scapegoating. Native Americans were initially targeted as they were heathens, but it was quickly the desire for land that maintained the orphan status for the Natives. Africans were in their turn used as free labor, and their orphan trope moved from a literal one to a cultural one.

African Americans were not only scapegoated into orphanhood, they became literal orphans the minute they were snatched from their homeland in Africa and brought to America during the Middle Passage. With the arrival of the first African slaves on the coast of Virginia in 1619, the “blacks had been torn from their land and culture, forced into a situation where the heritage of language, dress, custom, family relations, was bit by bit obliterated” (Zinn 26). With the horrifying conditions aboard the slave ships, it is beyond any doubt that the Middle Passage was a truly traumatic event for the “60 million and more” (*Beloved*) African men, women and children who were involved in the slave trade.

Judith Herman claims that “the core experience of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others” consequently, “traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (quoted in López Ramírez 77). Diana Pazicky uses Freudian theory to link individuals and community, saying “groups, and even nations, behave like individuals. Following this logic, one can infer that [groups] (...) can experience a sense of orphanhood and that its process of collective identity formation is also relational in nature” (xii). López Ramírez further claims that “social and racial minorities experience insidious trauma as a result of the cruelty inflicted by the dominant group (...). Consequently, they internalize feelings of inferiority and self-contempt, which are projected onto them by the patriarchal Western discourse” (76), explicitly linking orphanhood and trauma. Hence in this study I want to focus on the connections between these two concepts—trauma and orphanhood—and scrutinize the ways in which they often are related events

In *A Mercy* the community is still very ad-hoc and I will therefore argue that many readers witness more experiences of singular traumatic events than insidious trauma compared to what we see in *Beloved*. As America is still not a fully formed country and the characters stem from many different backgrounds, insidious trauma has not yet had time to

root, especially not in the racialized way we see in *Beloved*. There is however insidious trauma related to being a woman, and this will therefore be examined more closely in the section about *A Mercy* and compared to the sexualized trauma in *Beloved*. The series of singular traumatic events that characters are subjected to in *A Mercy*, lay the shaping ground for what will later amount to the historical insidious trauma that I analyze in *Beloved*.

1.3.1 Community

In this thesis, any mention of community refers to the African American community, unless it is otherwise specified. I will focus on how the community is influenced by the dominant, white society and what impact this has on its members, both as a group and as individuals. I will also argue that the black community itself can be seen as a figurative orphan, and thus orphanhood and community are linked together.

Through her texts, Toni Morrison is concerned with showing how and why community is important. In her article “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Morrison stresses the need to keep the ancestral veins open, and as “parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypical stories [anymore]” (399), the novel is now needed to convey the stories of the ancestors. Mar Gallego claims that Morrison “asserts the need for communal values in order to ensure the survival of the black community” (93) and that those values “create vital links within the community that help preserve their cultural uniqueness based on family and communal ties, while simultaneously rejecting the dominant American dogma of individualism” (93-93). According to Deirdre J. Raynor and Johnnella E. Butler there is an “importance of cultural, familial, and individual history or rememory, and connections between, and nurturing roles of, African American folk culture and black cultural beliefs across the diaspora” (175), and that Toni Morrison focuses her writing within topics related to these connections between the individual and the community.

A strong communal grounding can also be beneficiary when it comes to trauma and how it is experienced. In the psychological study “The influence of multiple oppressions on women of color’s experiences with insidious trauma”, Watson et.al. have examined whether a strong ethnic identity can “[protect] against harmful psychological outcomes” (658) such as symptoms of trauma. Ethnic identity is described as “a dynamic and multidimensional process that includes a sense of exploration of and belonging to one’s cultural group” (658), for instance the black community. The study was conducted using 368 women of color (WOC), all undergraduates at two American universities, and the participants were predominantly black (59%). The study found that “regardless of level of ethnic identity strength, racist

discriminations may be harmful for WOC's self-esteem. However, ethnic identity strength did buffer the link between racism and trauma symptoms" (663), meaning that "at least average levels of ethnic identity strength may be enough to protect WOC against symptoms of trauma in the face of racism" (663). As well as the community serving as a way to remember the ancestral past and to keep in touch with ones roots, it also provides protection against outside traumatic factors.

1.4 Toni Morrison

As the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize of literature in 1993, Toni Morrison is by many readers and critics alike, considered "America's national writer" and the "First Lady of literature" ("Imagine"). She was born in Lorain, Ohio, February 18, 1931, as Chloe Anthony² Wofford. Both her parents had moved North to Ohio to escape the hostile and racist South, and to seek better education and work opportunities. In an interview with Ms. Morrison by Susan Swain, Swain remarks:

When one looks at your family's story – your biography – it struck me, at least, that almost the entire story of black experience in America is contained in three generations in your family. Your grandfather - slave to a share-cropper; your father and mother – the great migration to the North; and you yourself - first generation college and a great success.

Pondering about this comparison, Morrison tells the story of her grandfather, who was born in 1860, and who was five years old when he heard from the adults that the "emancipation proclamation was coming". He thought it was a monster and crawled under the bed for safety. She further explains that she was:

very keenly aware of the really life-threatening circumstances under which they [her grandparents] lived; the difficulty my parents had as a young couple; and a kind of miraculous thing, I suppose, my generation. I just knew I really wanted to go to college. My mother was not interested in my getting married (...) or rather, she thought it shouldn't come too soon. She and my father were very supportive.

For Morrison, her ancestral roots are important and in this narrative of her family she can identify connections through generations. Such historical trajectory was often not possible for

² Sources show both "Anthony" and "Ardelia" as her middle name. John Duvall has published a copy of TM's birth certificate showing "Ardelia" (Tally xv) but TM herself states in an interview (Morrison "In Depth: Toni Morrison") that she was born "Chole Anthony", as it was her Catholic name.

African Americans who experienced slavery, and their heritage could in many cases not be traced back even one generation.

Morrison started her education at Howard University, Washington, D.C., in 1949. Howard was an important institution in the education of African Americans, being the first college that accepted both genders and all races. Although Howard was a prominent black college, black literary consciousness was not well known at the time of Morrison's education. When proposing in a class that she would write about black characters in Shakespeare, Morrison's professor was "horrified" by the idea, and Morrison was told that "this was not an appropriate subject for literary study" (Century 33). Even though she furthered her education at Cornell University by pursuing a master's degree in English, it was not until she moved to teach introductory English at Texas Southern University in Houston that she began to think about black culture as an academic discipline. When in 1957 she went back to Howard University to teach, the Civil Rights Movement was still in its early days. Morrison was very interested in what happened around her, and although she did not play an active part in the protests, she would meet several persons who would go on to become key figures in fighting for the rights of African Americans (Century 35).

After college, Morrison found herself unemployed and a single mother. She therefore happily accepted the position of associate editor in Random House in Syracuse, New York in 1964. Hoping for a transferal to the New York City office, Morrison did nothing to put down roots in Syracuse. She led a lonely life, only working and staying at home with her sons. Douglas Century explains:

It was then, in the lonely hours when the house was still and her sons fast asleep, that Toni Morrison began to write in earnest. She dug up [a] story she had written in her Washington writers' group years earlier and decided to expand it into a novel (41).

While the writing of the story which would later become known as *The Bluest Eye*, excited Morrison, she didn't think anyone was "ever going to read this until [she was] dead" (Century 43). But writing changed her life, and she has said: "whether or not it was successful – or even whether or not it was published – I was already committed" (Century 43). After only 18 months in Syracuse, Morrison got the transfer she had hoped for, and became a senior literary editor at Random House's office in New York City. In 1970, she published what would be her first of her eleven highly acclaimed novels to date, *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison has said that with the writing of her first book, she wanted to create a novel that she herself wanted to read, "the kind of book she did not see published in America, a book that presented 'the people who in all literature were always peripheral – little black girls who were props, background;

those people who were never center stage, and those people were me” (Century 13). It was not until after her three first novels were published that she decided to become a full-time writer, leaving her job as a publisher.

1.4.1 Toni Morrison – Literary legacy

In the BBC documentary “Toni Morrison remembers” from 2015, Morrison recalls an argument she had with a close friend when she was around ten years old. The quarrel was about whether or not God was real. Her friend said that she had proof that God did not exist, the evidence being that she had been praying for blue eyes for two years and still hadn’t got it. Morrison explains:

It was a real epiphany because I looked at her and thought this would be awful if God had given her blue eyes. And I realized she was absolutely beautiful. And at ten you don’t think in those terms, somebody’s cute or whatever, but not beauty. And that was the first time I saw it. She was very dark, she had these wonderful almond eyes, high cheekbones, I mean you could go on. And she wanted something other.

Morrison further explains that as a child everybody had white dolls with blonde hair that their parents gave them as presents. The white beauty was the norm. Some twenty years later, in the 1960’s, there was the “Black is Beautiful” movement, “but there was something that made Toni Morrison uneasy about what was then still a white-dominated, middle-class movement” (Century 47). Morrison, in the before mentioned BBC-interview, explains that whereas she understood “Black is Beautiful”:

I thought, “wait a minute, you have to say that? Of course we are”, and then “is that all? This is about beauty again? Is that what makes us human, acceptable, and besides it’s too frail”. It was part of what I really despised, which was addressing white people. Who are you talking to? You talking to me? No. I *know* I’m beautiful. Or it doesn’t matter to me. You’re talking to white people who are saying you’re not, and therefore you should be segregated or oppressed. I’m not talking to white people. I’m talking, in my books, to me. Which means I’m talking to black people. (...) [That is] the white man’s gaze. Once I took white people out (...) it’s like the whole world opened up. You could imagine anything, everything (“Imagine”).

“The white gaze”, a term coined by Morrison, has been an important factor in her works, or rather, an important factor to leave out. In her non-fiction book *Playing in the Dark – Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, she examines this further, along with the notion of the “Africanist persona”. Morrison claims that “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature” (39) and that with the enriched creative possibilities that black slavery created, the “construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only in the not-

free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (38). This led to a frightening otherness that objectified the blacks and created the Africanist persona in American literature. The Africans were often portrayed as dumb or comical characters, there to serve the whites. But on a general basis, the black Americans were mostly left out of the literary canon all together, as described by Morrison:

[The] traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature (*Playing in the Dark* 5).

There has of course been literature written by African Americans, but very much of that literature has been written with the white gaze in mind. Take the slave narratives for instance. In her article “This Site of Memory”, Morrison points out that there were two main reasons as for why the narratives were written. One was to give an account of his or her personal life, which also represented the black race. The other was to “write this text to persuade other people – you, the reader, who is probably not black – that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery” (86). These two accounts made the narratives clearly pointed at the white audience. It was also important to make a clear statement that African Americans could read and write, as the “writers knew that literacy was power. (...) Literacy was a way of assuming and proving the ‘humanity’ that the constitution denied them” (89), as blacks could not vote. Morrison further points out that the slave narratives were not only written during the Age of Enlightenment, but also “its twin, (...) the Age of Scientific Racism. David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, to mention only a few, had documented their conclusion that blacks were incapable of intelligence” (89), and thus it was even more important to prove them wrong.

Keeping their white audience in mind, the most horrifying and gruesome details of the slave experience were intentionally left out, and instead replaced by phrases such as “but let us put a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate” (“The Site of Memory” 90). In order to make the texts more acceptable to those who could help abolish slavery, the former slaves “were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (91). Also, there was never any mention of their interior life in the narratives. Morrison explains:

For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after the Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman – the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate”. The exercise is also critical for any person who is

black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic (“The Site of Memory” 91).

Morrison uses both her memory and the memory of others, as well as imagination, to give a voice to the voiceless African Americans over the past 400 years in America. All of the African Americans who were literally, spiritually, and culturally orphaned by being cut off from their ancestral past, their families, their collective memory. Morrison declares: “If you study the culture and art of African-Americans, you are not studying regional or minor culture. What you are studying is America” (Century 94). Morrison’s powerful approach to the historical themes can be witnessed in her novels. She boldly represents many taboo subjects concerning the African American past, and represents the American culture as a society that has effectively traumatized and orphaned African Americans throughout centuries.

2 A Mercy

2.1 Introduction

One of Toni Morrison's more recently published novels, *A Mercy* is the novel set furthest from today. The story takes us more than 300 years back in time, to the late 1600s, to where "what we now call America was fluid, ad hoc, a place where countries from all over the world were grabbing at land and resources, and all sorts of people were coming here" ("Morrison Discusses"). Morrison further tells Lynn Neary in the NPR interview "Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*", that she wanted to explore what America was like in a pre-racial time. She wanted to "separate race from slavery, to see what it was like, what it might have been like to be a slave, but (...) without being raced", and she didn't believe that race and racism was the "natural state", but "that it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized and legalized", the construction of which we begin to see in *A Mercy*.

The literary conversation around *A Mercy* has dealt with both orphanhood and trauma, as well as motherhood, female identity, and community³. Manuela López Ramírez links orphanhood and trauma, and talks about singular and insidious trauma, but only applies them to one character, namely Sorrow. I will use both themes and apply my findings to several of the characters. I will argue that the Europeans, Rebekka, Jacob, Willard, and Scully, mainly have experienced insidious trauma in their countries of origin, and that this in combination with orphaning shows how the Europeans further oppress and scapegoat others. The characters Lina, Sorrow, and Florens experience singular traumatic events as a direct result of the Europeans settlement in America. All the women, however, suffer insidious trauma because they are female in a strictly patriarchal society.

While *A Mercy* is set before the pairing of race and slavery is complete, we clearly see that the scapegoating explained by Diane Pazicky has started. I will therefore apply Pazicky's theory to the analysis of this chapter, as I look at the novel in its historical context. I will also focus on the particular orphaning of women, namely Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and A Minha Mãe, in relation to men with the focus on Jacob, Willard and Scully. Furthermore, I will look at the role of the community in Colonial America, though with this novel, the focus will not

³ For more, see López Ramírez, 2013; Vega-González, 2011, and Gallego-Durán, 2011.

be confined to the African-American community, but rather on the importance of community in general, as the racial divide had not yet been made distinct.

2.2 Historical backdrop – “We never shape the world . . . the world shapes us”

In 1619, a Dutch ship entered Jamestown in the colony of Virginia, carrying twenty African slaves, the first to arrive in British North America (Zinn 23). The first African slaves were, according to Susana Vega González (2011), like white indentured servants in status and rights. They could work off their time and eventually earn their freedom. Some free Africans even owned other indentured, black servants (121). Although the coupling of race and slavery is not complete by the time this novel is set, Jacob mentions a rebellion in *A Mercy*, a “people’s war” that took place:

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured – had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that ‘people’s war’ lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done (...) spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they *separated and protected all whites from all others forever* (8, italics added).

This uproar became known as Bacon’s rebellion and took place in 1676, leading England to send “a thousand soldiers across the Atlantic, hoping to maintain order among forty thousand colonists” (Zinn 39). The leader of the uprising, Nathaniel Bacon, was himself gentry, and together the mixed group of men burned the capital of Jamestown, forcing the governor to flee. In “Morrison Discusses”, Morrison claims this was one of many things throughout history that caused the divide between black and white and that “that kind of thing spread because it was profitable and useful and it protected landed gentry because they could divide and conquer”.

With a growing need for labor, more and more Africans were snatched from their homelands and shipped off to America. Vega González (2011) claims that African Americans being “uprooted from their African home, cultures, traditions and lives as a result of slavery, (...) embody the very essence of orphanhood in all its dimensions” (120). The very first experience for Africans being brought to America was precisely that; cut off from their families, leaving millions of people orphaned, literally and culturally. Historian Kenneth M. Stamp claims that although “the first important legal distinction between white and Negro

servants” (22) was around 1660, the coupling between the black race and slavery did not occur until the eighteenth century. Though Morrison herself says that she wanted to examine the only time in America when race was *not* an issue, we start seeing an emerging pattern of racial issues in the story of *A Mercy*.

Diane Pazicky claims that the “orphan imagery is inseparable from familial imagery, and that the metaphorical meaning of orphanhood depends on the larger symbolic context of the family (...). In American history, the family is the paradigmatic institution that defines cultural values” (xiii). She further states that “orphan imagery appears as a response to the social upheaval and internal tensions generated by three major episodes in American history: the Great Migration, the Revolution, and the rise of the republic. During these periods, the orphan trope signifies the threat to the identity of the dominant culture” (xiii). Furthermore:

those who considered themselves the natural or adopted ‘children’ of that ‘family’ came to fear orphanhood and needed scapegoats onto whom their identification with orphanhood could be displaced. The targets of such displacement were groups of marginalized racial, religious, and ethnic outsiders – negroes, Indians, and immigrants – who represented difference. By becoming cultural ‘orphans’, they enabled the ‘children’ to protect their identity within the family of the colony or republic. For example, during the colonial period, the trauma of separation from England, a composite parental figure in the form of the mother country and the father king, created doubt among the Puritans about their mission in the New World and their status as God’s adopted ‘children’ (...) and fostered an identification with political and spiritual orphanhood (xiii).

Pazicky further points out that economy played a crucial role in the separation of whites from all others, “for these scapegoats were Indians exploited for their land, immigrants exploited as a source of cheap labor, and Negroes exploited for their servitude. Prevented by various forms of oppression from holding property or even rights of citizenship, they were unadoptable victims of poverty and of political as well as cultural orphanhood” (200). Fleeing oppression in their native countries, many Europeans left for the New World in order to escape persecution. Having internalized their oppressors views and entered a state of cultural orphanhood, they did onto others exactly what they tried to escape from in Europe.

2.3 The story

Set in 1690, the novel introduces us to Jacob Vaark's farm in Milton, in what would be today's upstate New York⁴. In the novel, sixteen-year-old Florens is the protagonist. Florens's narrative is the only first-person narrative, and is also the only one in present tense. Morrison explains that this was done "to give it the immediacy" ("Morrison Discusses") of a story told at this moment. Florens's narrative spans through the novel in every other chapter. In the remaining chapters, we are introduced to the stories of the other main characters; Jacob Vaark, Lina, Rebekka Vaark, Sorrow, Willard and Scully, and *A Minha Mãe*, respectively. The third person narratives of these characters add to the story, filling in the gaps and making the story complete, as each of their stories fits with Florens's ongoing telling. Morrison explains: "[the other characters] have to not only be who they are and what they want and what their circumstances are, but they have to move that story a little bit, so you're never out of the track" ("Morrison Discusses"). Although the story is set in 1690, the overlapping accounts of Florens and the other characters form a jigsaw puzzle. Through the characters' accounts we gather fragments of their pasts and little by little we are able to piece it all together.

Jacob Vaark is an Anglo-Dutch trader who inherits land from a distant uncle "from the side of his family that had abandoned him" (9). He starts a farm on his plot of land in the New World, and takes up trading of goods. His wife, Rebekka, a "mail-order bride" from England, was sold off to the New World and a life with Jacob Vaark. At the age of sixteen "she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her" (72). Rebecca and Jacob's three sons die in infancy, and their daughter Patrician is killed by the kick of a mare at the age of five, leaving the couple without heirs.

While expecting the arrival of his English bride, Vaark buys Lina to help on the farm after seeing the Presbyterian's ad for her: "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (50). Lina, aged fourteen when bought, is a lonely Native-American, who has lost her entire tribe and family to smallpox. Taken in by the Presbyterians and afraid to be left alone again, "Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies" (45). However, purification does not automatically make you a child of God, so although she was included in daily prayer, "they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended" (46).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the location of the Vaark farm, see Valkeakari, p. 109.

From the Presbyterians she learns that “some of the church elders had heard horrible tales of, or witnessed themselves, God’s wrath toward the idle and profane (...) they could only pray that Lina’s people understood before they died that what had befallen them was merely the first sign of His displeasure” (45). After arriving on the Vaark farm, Lina finally finds “a way to be in the world” by combining what she has learned from the Europeans with “piecing together the scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony” (46).

Sorrow, a “mongrelized” (118) girl, is an orphan discovered at a shipwreck and taken in by a sawyer and his family. Sorrow is repeatedly raped by the sawyer’s two sons, and by the time the sawyer asks Jacob to take her as part of a trading deal she is pregnant at the age of 11. When Sorrow arrives at the Vaark farm, “the resident women were a united front in dismay. To Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh” (51). Lina blames Sorrow for the death of Rebekka’s infant sons. Sorrow is told by Lina that her own baby is stillborn, although Sorrow swears she sees her baby yawn. However, “for a little while Lina seemed to be persuaded that the boys’ deaths were not Sorrow’s fault, but when a horse broke Patrician’s crown, she changed her mind” (122). Sorrow becomes pregnant again. She does not tell anyone who the father is, but we understand she has some sort of relationship with the deacon: “There were cherries, too, and walnuts from the deacon. But she had to be quiet. Once he brought her a neckerchief which she filled with stones and threw in the stream, knowing such finery would (...) alert Mistress” (121). Seeing Florens and the blacksmith make love on a meadow and describing what she sees as “a dancing” (126), Sorrow compares it to her own experience: “what Sorrow saw yonder in the grass under a hickory tree was not the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew” (126), again hinting that it might be the deacon who has fathered her child and that there was no love involved in the relationship between them. Sorrow delivers the baby with just a little help from Willard and Scully, and renames herself Complete as she takes on motherhood.

Florens is a young black girl around 16 years of age, given to Jacob Vaark as a debt settlement eight years prior. On one of his business travels, Jacob is persuaded into taking a slave as payment from a Portuguese gentleman, D’Ortega, rather than the money owed to him. Jacob is reluctant but he finally chooses a slave that he is certain D’Ortega will not give up. To his surprise the chosen slave woman begs him to take her daughter instead. The child “appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so” (24), so Jacob gives in and has her brought to the farm. Florens, not knowing who her father is and being given away by her mother, *A Minha Mãe*, is

now an orphan left with “a deep feeling of abandonment verging on rejection” triggering a “constant yearning for mother love” (Vega González 121) and an “eagerness for approval” (94).

Jacob creates a sort of family on his farm with himself acting as a father figure, Rebekka as the mother and the servant girls their daughters. By engaging in far away slave trade, Jacob earns more through his trading and builds ever bigger houses to show off his new-found wealth. By the time his third and last house is completed, Jacob falls ill with smallpox and the women just manage to carry him inside before he dies, never experiencing the “profane monument to himself” (42), as Lina describes the house. Rebekka, who has been happy leading a life on the farm within their small community, changes when Jacob dies. She herself falls ill to pox, but surviving from it, she seeks out the religious community and shuts out the other women on the farm.

The narration starts with Florens talking directly to someone, and it soon becomes clear that Florens’ outpouring is directed at the blacksmith, with whom she had an affair while he stayed at the Vaark farm doing labor for Jacob. While he was there, he cured Sorrow of smallpox, and we learn that Florens is on her way to find him to cure Rebekka as she also falls sick with pox after Jacob dies from it. Florens is immediately infatuated with the blacksmith the moment he sets foot on the farm and she “[runs] away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me” (35). Florens finds the blacksmith and he returns to the Vaark farm to cure Rebekka. The blacksmith, however, rejects Florens, and the anger and pain ultimately leads her to be re-made and find a sense of Self. After returning to the Vaark farm she spends the nights etching her story into the walls of the house Jacob built just before he died.

Willard and Scully are two indentured servants from Europe rented out to Jacob every now and then by a neighboring master. The men consider the Vaark farm and its inhabitants “the closest either man would know of a family. A good-hearted couple (parents), and three female servants (sisters, say) and them helpful sons. Each member dependent on them, none cruel, all kind” (142). Scully, the younger of the two servants, has no “carnal interest in females”, and during a freezing night in the barn with Willard, “their own bodies clinging together, Scully altered his plans and Willard didn’t mind at all” (152). The two indentured servants act as outside observers to the Vaark farm and give us a deeper insight into what life was like both in Europe and America at that time.

The end of the novel leaves the three women on the Vaark farm to their own devices. In primeval America this does not bode them well, as they are “wild game for anyone” (56) without the protection of a man. Their futures remain open as Rebekka immerses herself in religion, forces Lina to accompany her, beats Sorrow and puts Florens up for sale. Scully observes that “their futures were separate and anyone’s guess” (154), but with both Sorrow and Florens having found a new, strong sense of self, the readers are left with hope for their futures.

2.4 The othering of others

While on her journey to the blacksmith, Florens seeks refuge for the night, knocking on a door in a village she passes. A woman, Widow Ealing, opens and invites Florens in. While eating, Florens notices a girl lying in a bed. “One of her eyes looks away, the other is as straight and unwavering as a she-wolf’s” (105). The girl gets up and Florens “[sees] dark blood belting down her legs” (106). After Florens goes to sleep, she hears the Widow and her daughter Jane talk, saying “demons do not bleed” (107). The next morning, Widow Ealing “freshens the leg wounds” (107) on her daughter. While Florens is in the closet where the water basin is, they hear footsteps coming to the house. Florens hears the Widow telling her visitors that “her daughter’s eye is askew as God made it and it has no special powers. And look, she says, look at her wounds. God’s son bleeds. We bleed. Demons never” (108). Florens steps into the room and observes “a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away” (108-109). Florens is thinking how sweet the little girl is “when she screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women” (109). Upon seeing Florens, “the women gasp” (109) and the man points to her with his stick, asking who she is. Widow Ealing explains, and “one woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another” (109). Making a point of how scared the little girl is, another one of the women concludes “it is true then (...). The Black Man is among us. This is his minion” (109). Florens brings out a letter she has been carrying, stating who she is and that she is owned by Rebekka Vaark. After reading the note, the man and the women tell Florens to undress, looking for proof that she might be a demon as well. While they examine her naked body Florens looks at their eyes: “No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough” (111). The bodily examination leads

nowhere, so they take the letter with them to discuss the matter further. While they are gone, daughter Jane takes Florens with her, gives her food and tells her where to go. Florens thanks her, but Jane says, “no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me” (112).

The group’s reaction to Florens indicates that being black is worse than other characteristics that differ from the white norm. Janet Handley claims that “The group has arrived to investigate Daughter Jane who has an eye that is askew; in their view a potential sign of the Devil, requiring investigations into whether she should be tried as a witch” (8). Further, “[Morrison] draws attention to the ‘othering’ of people on the basis of physical appearance and the consequences thereof. She draws parallels between what was to become the ideology underpinning racism and the persecution of vulnerable individuals for witchcraft in seventeenth century America” (9). Although Daughter Jane has “pale skin” (106), she is still “othered” by the group because she is cross-eyed. This is however quickly forgotten when the group lay their eyes on a black girl, and all focus shift from Daughter Jane to Florens. It is clear that the dominant group is easily threatened and that it does not take much to be othered. The focus of the scapegoating is however prevalent towards blacks and other marginalized peoples, in accordance with Pazicky’s theory.

It is not just Florens who is looked upon as other because of the color of her skin. Jacob refers to the slaves aboard D’Ortega’s ship simply as “cargo” (14), although seeing slaves up close nauseates him and he hires a black man to do work for him. Even Lina, who falls victim to the hands of the Europeans herself, gets nervous when she learns that the black blacksmith is a free man: “He had rights then, and privileges, like Sir (...). She should have seen the danger immediately because his arrogance was clear” (43). Lina fits the same paradox as Jacob, seeing as although “Lina had fallen in love with [Florens] right away” (58) and treats the black child like her own daughter, she is anxious over the “disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause” (59). The same can be said for Willard. He reminisces about a previous place he has worked where they were “six English, one native, twelve from Africa by way of Barbados. No women anywhere. The camaraderie among them was sealed by their hatred of the overseer and the master’s odious son” (147). Despite having worked with black men before and been friends with them, he is upset when Jacob hires the blacksmith: “learning the blacksmith was being paid for his work, like the men who delivered building materials, unlike the men he worked with in Virginia, roiled Willard, and he, encouraging Scully, refused any request the black man made” (148). Hearing the blacksmith call him “Mr.Bond” (148) Willard calms down and “although he was still rankled by the

status of a free African versus himself, there was nothing he could do about it” (149). This shows that although racism wasn’t prevalent yet, the status of Africans was diminishing.

2.5 Community

A Mercy is set in a pre-racialized time and the communities are non-comparable to the more race-established community I will examine in *Beloved*. The community discussed in this chapter will be the one on the Vaark farm. Morrison explains:

I wanted this group to be the earliest version of American individuality, American self-sufficiency and I think I wanted to show the dangers of that. You really do need a community. You do need a structure, whether it’s a church or a religion as Rebekka thinks, or whether it’s just belonging to a military unit (...). There is no outside thing that holds them together. If you have *one* peg that’s holding it all together [like the Master, Jacob], then you see how vulnerable you are if you don’t have this outside thing (“Morrison Discusses”).

The fact that the women in particular are lost without a community is observed by several of the characters. Lina worries that if Rebekka dies, the women left on the farm will be “unmastered” (56) and free game to anyone. The women, though none of them have parents, don’t consider themselves fully orphaned until after Jacob dies. Lina concludes: “As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family – not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all” (57). Lina, being certain that her Mistress will die, knows that “[that] certainty was a kind of death for her as well, since her own life, everything depended on Mistress’ survival” (58). For Rebekka, as long as Jacob is alive, “the cost of a solitary, unchurched life was not high” (91), but she realizes after his death that a “widow was in practice illegal” (96). Being “confused about her role” (96) and seeking redemption, she distances herself from the other women on the farm. Awaiting Florens’s return with the blacksmith, Rebekka wonders: “How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone assault her will she return will he and is it already too late? *For salvation*” (98, italics added). Rebekka’s fear of being without Jacob leads her into religion as a kind of last resort. After the blacksmith concludes that “the sickness is dead. Not you” (127), Sorrow observes Rebekka getting on her knees, bowing her head and seeming completely alone in the world: “Sorrow understood that servants, however many, would not make a difference. Somehow their care and devotion did not matter to her. So Mistress had no one – no one at all. Except the One she was whispering to: ‘Thank you my Lord for the saving grace you have shown me’” (127-128). Scully also observes that “Mistress passed her days with the joy of a clock. She was a penitent, pure and simple. Which to him meant that underneath her piety was

something cold if not cruel” (151). Rebekka, thinking about the differences between her shipmates; many of whom were prostitutes, and other God-fearing church-women, finds one common ground:

Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay. And both had come to terms. Some, like Lina, who had experienced both deliverance and destruction at their hands, withdrew. Some, like Sorrow, who apparently was never coached by other females, became their play. Others, the pious, obeyed them. And a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, became like children when the man was gone (96).

Having become more culturally orphaned, child-less and child-like, being in “an abyss of loss” wondering “if the journey to this land, the dying off of her family, her whole life, in fact, were way-stations marking a road to revelation. Or perdition?” (98), Rebekka turns to the only other community she knows: religion. Despite her re-connection with the Christian community and with God, Florens observes that “Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone. Each time she returns from the meetinghouse her eyes are nowhere and have no inside”. Florens further notes that “[Rebekka’s] church going alters her but I don’t believe they tell her to behave that way. These rules are her own and she is not the same” (157).

The other women on the farm are un-mastered without Jacob and Rebekka, and seeing as they have a low status as females but also because they are non-whites, the future is unclear for all of the women. The future possibilities for Rebekka, Lina, Florens and Sorrow are a stark contrast to that of Willard and Scully. Seeing the downfall on the Vaark farm after Jacob’s death, Scully is sad to think:

They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone’s guess. One thing was certain, courage alone would not be enough. Minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them. Nevertheless, remembering how the curate described what existed before Creation, Scully saw dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world. Perhaps their wages were not as much as the blacksmith’s, but for Scully and Mr. Bond it was enough to imagine a future (153-154).

Being men, and getting paid for some of their labor, Willard and Scully can envision a hopeful future, and although both of their original years of indenturement have stretched out, there is a great chance that they will in fact become free men one day. Sorrow is planning escape, and Florens, already put up for sale on posters in the village, is thinking about joining

her after she finishes her writings on the wall. Their prospects are not great. Womanhood comes at a risk of being raped, stolen or worse. Lina, who was badly beaten by her lover while living with the Presbyterians, realizes “She had no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a Europe” (50). She knows that not belonging to a community, or even belonging to a female community but without a male protector, the women have no freedom. Unable to marry or belong to a church, the minority women in particular do not have great prospects without a communal belonging.

2.6 Historical orphanhood and trauma

The Middle Passage was the start of the orphaning of the Africans brought to America. The conditions on the ships that brought them over were horrid, and their life in the New World was not much better. Cut off from their family, county, language and history, the slaves that were brought over became literal as well as cultural orphans. However, during the 1600’s this was not the case for all Africans. For some, the enslavement was similar to that of the servitude among the Europeans, meaning that blacks could also earn their freedom. In the story we meet the blacksmith who comes to work on the gates for Jacob’s new house. A free black man, the blacksmith remains unnamed throughout the novel, perhaps to bolster his mysterious presence in the story. He tells Florens he is “a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that” (67). He speaks about his family, how both his father and grandfather and “back and back for a thousand years” work with metal “with furnaces from termite mounds” (66). He sees signs in nature that he relates to his ancestors, so that when he speaks his father and grandfather’s names “two owls appear (...) so you understand [the ancestors] are showing themselves to bless you” (66). This is all we learn of his background, and as Florens remembers him saying that he sees “slaves freer than free men” (158), we cannot be sure whether he was initially a free man or became one after having been indentured.

Rebekka also arrives in the New World by ship, stowed under deck in a confined space with other women from England, telling Lina “I shat among strangers for six weeks to get to this land. (...) There was no other way packed like cod between decks” (70-71). Despite this similarity to the journey endured by Africans across the Atlantic, both the reason for leaving England and the new life awaiting Rebecca in America could not differ more. Having seen her first hangings at the age of two, and as “brawls, knifings and kidnaps were so common in the city of her birth that the warnings of slaughter in a new, unseen world were like threats of bad weather” (73), the thought of America hardly seemed worse. Rebekka’s

prospects in England “were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest”, and “hence marriage to an unknown husband in a far-off land had distinct advantages: (...) especially escape from the leers and rude hands of any man, drunken or sober, she might walk by” (76). Aboard the ship, the women below deck “had become the kind of family sea journeys create” (79) and as long as they were at sea the “women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither” (83), seemingly rendering the journey to America the greatest sensation of freedom Rebekka has ever felt. Although Rebekka in a sense becomes an orphan as well, a white European’s travel to America is in stark contrast to the Middle Passage of the innumerable slaves from Africa. From the moment they set foot in The New World, the experience for blacks and whites differed in most cases, and was almost always worse for the Africans. And with their rights dwindling with the increased laws of separation and othering, the experience grew worse.

In *A Mercy* we also encounter the Native American, Lina, who became an orphan as her family and tribe were wiped out due to diseases spread by the Europeans. Not being allowed to nurture her ancestral past and culture by the Presbyterians who take her in, she also becomes a cultural orphan at the hands of the Europeans. Native Americans were initially scapegoated as they were heathens, but it quickly became the desire for land that led to the furthering of the victimizing of the Natives. Vega González claims that “around the figure of the orphan coalesce the ideas of detachment, alienation, bereavement and, on many occasions, mourning on the one hand, and the chance to create something anew, the possibility of inventing oneself and ultimately undergoing an empowering rebirth” (120). This corresponds to some of the characters in the story, as will be examined below.

There are, as mentioned earlier, two ways I will examine trauma in this chapter. The first being *singular trauma* in which a person experiences a deeply distressing occurrence, something which is “outside the range of human experience” (Brown 101). The second being *insidious trauma* where the effects of oppression might not be “overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but (...) do violence to the soul and spirit” (Root in Brown 107). In *A Mercy* we encounter both these types of trauma. I will argue that the combination of traumatic experiences in their homelands and their fear of orphanhood in the New World, led the Europeans to internalize their oppressors’ views, hence placing the blame onto the scapegoats in the new society, namely non-dominant groups.

2.6.1 Rebekka

Rebekka, coming from a brutal culture in England where torture and hangings were a part of everyday entertainment, sees her new life in America as a blessing. Her past life entailed a family who did not care very much about one another, and especially about her, as she was female. After arriving in America and marrying Jacob Vaark, she suffers the heartbreaking ordeal of losing all of her four children. Seemingly coping with both the insidious traumatic events of her past and the singular traumas of her children's deaths, Rebekka changes quite drastically when Jacob dies. Mar Gallego-Durán proposes the following theory about Rebekka's change:

Contrary to most assumptions about the novel, the climatic turn that deeply upsets and manages to overturn the female community is instigated not by Vaark's death, but by Rebekka's subsequent act of betrayal of Lina and, therefore, of the whole community. After her husband's passing away, Rebekka fails to envision a female alternative worldview to the patriarchal model that has apparently conformed and contained their lives till then, and resorts to religion as the only viable exit. By so doing, she violently disrupts the harmony created among these women in their haven, their refuge away from sexual prejudice (106).

Although Rebekka acts very differently after Jacob's death, I disagree with Gallego-Durán in her claim that Rebekka betrays Lina and the other women on the Vaark farm by taking distance from them. Orphaned by her parents when they sent her away 14 years prior, Rebekka is "re-orphaned" once her husband dies, becoming once more like a child "when the man was gone" (96), ultimately playing in full the "orphan motif, with its themes of alienation, abuse, and journey" (Roberts 327). Rebekka does not undergo a re-invention of herself nor does she experience "an empowering re-birth" (Vega-González 120) due to her orphaning like Lina, Florens, and Sorrow do. She becomes secluded, and alienates herself even more from her known community. Having suffered a terrible childhood, Rebekka remembers watching people hanged for entertainment, of which "her nightmares were made permanently vivid by years of retelling and redescribing by her parents" (73). She remembers seeing "the pile of frisky, still living entrails held before the felon's eyes then thrown into a bucket and tossed into the Thames; fingers trembling for a lost torso; the hair of a woman guilty of mayhem bright with flame" (74). Her parents, who "treated each other and their children with glazed indifference" (72), and who finally sold her, and losing all of her four children and her loving husband, the one she felt blessed to have, Rebekka has clearly had her share of traumatic experiences in her lifetime. Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, claims that "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and

disconnection from others” (133), and consequently “traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51). I therefore believe that the traumatic experience of Jacob’s death was the final straw for Rebekka, surrendering to the effects of trauma and the subsequent alienation from her community. A victim to both insidious trauma and singular traumatic events, Rebekka finally internalizes her oppressor, the patriarchy’s notion that women are below men, and she herself becomes an oppressor of the other women on the farm, claiming a higher position than them. She does in that sense betray the other women, but lacking other coping strategies for her painful experiences, she seeks out the religious community rather than the female community on the farm.

Rebekka, thinking she is on her death bed due to the smallpox, is contemplating religion. Having not cared too much about religion before, she is afraid of her new status as “a widow was in practice illegal” (96). The Anabaptists whom she has had a troublesome relationship with before as they refused to baptize her children, now seem like the logical choice. They are “not confused about any of this”, “they understood, also, that there were lines of acceptable behavior and righteous thought. Levels of sin, in other words, and lesser peoples. Natives and Africans, for instance, had access to grace but not to heaven” (96). She, on the other hand, would go to heaven where “God would take pity and allow her children, though too young for a baptism of full immersion, entrance to His sphere”, and there would be “no illness. Ever. No pain. No aging or frailty of any kind. No loss or grief or tears. And obviously no more dying” (97). Although the servants on the Vaark farm are like a family or at the very least friends to Rebekka, after she becomes ill and turns to God, she thinks to herself “now (...) there is no one except servants” (97) This indicates that she has separated the Native, Lina; the African, Florens; and mixed raced, Sorrow, servants from herself, and that “she turns to the race privilege and a religious orthodoxy that promises her life hereafter with ‘[n]o illness’” (Babb 158).

2.6.2 Sorrow

While we do not know much about Sorrow’s life prior to the shipwreck, we get the impression that she led a good, although unusual, life. The only thing we learn is that the captain of the ship was her father and that he “reared her not as a daughter but as a sort of crewman-to-be” (125). The last thing she remembered before the ship ran aground is having been taken to the surgeon’s hammock to “have the boils removed from her neck” (114). Sedated by opium, she wakes up under the hammock alone, not knowing what has happened

or where her father or anyone else are. Before the shipwreck she “had never set foot on land and was terrified of leaving ship for shore” (124). Waking up alone and scared, Sorrow conjures up an alter ego, Twin, to help her cope with the trauma. Manuela López Ramírez claims:

As a survivor of a devastating event, Sorrow feels that the basic assumptions and expectations of her life have been destroyed and, with them, the continuing sense of self and the possibility of nurturing human relationships. Her agonizing ordeal annihilates the indispensable psychological strategy for coping with paramount experiences (84).

Sorrow relies heavily on Twin, and it is Twin who finally helps Sorrow muster up the courage to swim ashore to seek help. Ramírez further states, “identity splitting or dissociation is a common defense mechanism in the face of trauma” (85). Having become both an orphan and having her whole known life suddenly removed from her, it is no wonder that she needs Twin to help her cope and carry on.

Being rescued by a sawyer and his family, Sorrow is put to do household tasks. As Sorrow has to fight “with the distressing gravity of land” (117), she stumbles and trips so much that she causes a ruckus on the farm. The sawyer’s wife puts her to even simpler tasks, but the “housewife raged happily at every unswept corner, poorly made fire, imperfectly scrubbed pot, carelessly weeded garden row and badly plucked bird” (117). Sorrow tries to sneak away with Twin as much as she can, and “on occasion she had secret company other than twin” (117). She is repeatedly raped by the sawyer’s two sons, and she does not know she is pregnant by the time she reaches the Vaark farm.

When she arrives at the farm, both Rebekka and Lina are quick to dismiss her. Coming across as “mongrelized”, Sorrow is in fact scapegoated by the other women of the household. Rebekka, aware that Sorrow “was never coached by other females” (96) and is therefore considered play for men, does nothing to coach her further. Lina even drowns Sorrow’s first baby, adding even more trauma to her already painful life. Mar Gallego-Durán claims that “all the female characters are fragmented and traumatized prior to their arrival at Vaark’s farm, and their female bonding helps them to nurture and care for each other, establishing crucial mother-daughter and sister bonds among them” (106). This is true of Florens, Lina and Rebekka, but Sorrow is systematically kept out of the “family”. Ramírez explains this as such: “Sorrow cannot be a part of the household women, themselves victims, who go on to victimize the mongrelized orphan”, further “in a progress of displacement, the community projects their own fears, frustrations, hostility, hopelessness, insecurity, etc. onto their most weakest and helpless members” (86).

The rescue for Sorrow is ironically the result of yet another rape. She falls pregnant again, but this time relies fully on herself to take care of the baby. Though she has been repeatedly raped and abused by men, Sorrow sees it differently: “all her life she had been saved by men – Captain, the sawyers’ sons (...)” (131). One can infer that Sorrow has indeed suffered a great deal of insidious trauma as she considers the abuse she has suffered at the hands of men a rescue. Having had no women to turn to or to guide her could explain why she feels this way. As Sorrow is preparing for the baby’s arrival, Twin becomes more silent and absent. With the birth of her baby, Twin vanishes completely, but her “absence was hardly noticed as [Sorrow] concentrated on her daughter” (131). Sorrow, proud to be managing motherhood on her own, renames herself Complete, and it is through motherhood that she “reconstructs her fractured self” (Ramírez 88). Ramírez claims: “Through Sorrow, Morrison reveals that mental instability, besides an outward expression of inner pain, may also be part of a healing process, which tells us of the human beings’ power and courage to carry on” (89). Having had little guidance and love in her life, Sorrow still manages to re-invent herself and finding her own identity through motherhood. By the end of the novel, she is prepared to run away and take her daughter and Florens with her. Although their futures remains unclear as they are women, it is still hopeful as Sorrow has learned to trust herself and found strength in motherhood.

2.6.3 A Minha Mãe

In the very last chapter of the book, we hear A Minha Mãe’s story. A Minha Mãe recollects how, in Angola, their houses are burned down, people tied together with vine, they are moved four times, “each time more trading, more culling, more dying” (161). They are finally driven into a holding pen where they see “men we believe are ill or dead” as “their skin was confusing. The men guarding we and selling we are black” and they have to “assure we that the whitened men do not want to eat we” (162). The captured Africans are divided and brought to “a house made to float on the sea” (162) where many try, and some succeed in killing themselves. Being beaten, starved, and living in each other’s excrements, the ship arrives in Barbados. Spending only a little time in the cane fields, A Minha Mãe was taken away to be re-sold. It was while sitting on display she learned “how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song – all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as *a black* that I was purchased by Senhor” (163, italics added). She is, along with other Africans brought to the Americas, reduced to a label, simply being black, not a person, treated as cattle

that has to be “broken in” or rather gang raped to produce offspring and hence more free labor.

Aware of the gruesome fate awaiting Florens at D’Ortega’s plantation, *Jublio*, A Minha Mãe finally begs Jacob, a stranger with “no animal in his heart” (161) to take Florens as “he never looked at me the way senhor does. He did not want” (161). Having realized that Florens with a want for “the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around [her] chest” (164) attracted the unwanted attention of D’Ortega, A Minha Mãe tries to tell Florens:

I heard their voices and gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes. One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was A Mercy. Offered by a human (164-165).

Susana Vega-González states that “after the Middle Passage, life as a slave enhances alienation, dispossession and oppression” (130). With this in mind, A Minha Mãe sacrifices the bond with her daughter in what is ultimately a self-less act of love. Katrina M. Szczurek says “to be an African slave woman in the colonies is to be crushed by the entire weight of the brutal hierarchical pyramid of class, race, and gender, which shows no mercy” (quoted in Gallego-Durán 105). By orphaning her own daughter, A Minha Mãe gives Florens the only protection she sees possible from the trauma awaiting her at D’Ortega’s. Aware of the insidious trauma women suffer, A Minha Mãe knows there is no protection outside of *Jublio*. Being a woman and a black slave, A Minha Mãe will not be able to defend Florens herself, but by giving her away she hopes for a slightly better future for her daughter.

2.6.4 Florens

For Florens, “the beginning begins with shoes” and she explains that “when a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes” (2) and Lina further observes that “[Florens’s] feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires” (2). Her tender feet are a metaphor for Florens herself, as she is a “docile creature” (144) and has a constant “eagerness for approval” (94). This need for approval stems from when her mother gave her to Jacob Vaark. Never having realized the true reasons for her mother’s choice, Florens is deeply traumatized by what she thinks is her mother choosing her brother over her, and simply giving her away. She has a yearning for motherlove, and as Lina yearns to be a mother, they cling to each other from the

moment Florens arrives at the farm. Lina knows that “mother hunger – to be one or have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which (...) remained alive, traveling the bone” (61). With the arrival of the blacksmith, Florens shifts her attention to him and falls totally and utterly in love with him. With the first look they share Florens thinks “for the first time I am alive” (36). Florens, having been insecure already, loses herself completely to her infatuation, thinking “[he is] my shaper and my world as well” (69). Feeling a looseness, Florens thinks about freedom: “Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (68). They have an affair while the blacksmith is there working on the gates of the new house. Having left without saying goodbye, Florens “dream[s] and plot[s]” (2) about the blacksmith. When Rebecca falls ill after Jacob’s death, she sends Florens to find the blacksmith as Florens was “clever and because she had strong reason to succeed” (94). Florens sets off on her journey wearing Sir’s boots and carrying a letter from Rebekka stating who she is. Although Florens has never been abused by men, she is scared on her trip as she knows “that I must no be alone with strange men with slow hands when in liquor” (39).

Upon arriving at the blacksmith’s house, the initial joy of being with him again quickly fades. Once the blacksmith goes to Milton, Florens has to stay behind at the blacksmith’s house in order to look after a boy, a foundling, and “[she worries] as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me” (134). Florens and the boy, Malaik, do not get along. He hides from her, and she sees “a minha mãe is standing by your cot and this time her baby boy is Malaik” (136), fearing that once again a little boy will be chosen over her. Malaik hides Florens’ boots, and in return she puts his doll “too high for him to reach” (137). Malaik starts screaming and will not stop, and Florens, in an attempt to silence him, ends up hurting him. The blacksmith returns to find the boy has fainted, with his shoulder out of joint and blood coming from his mouth. The blacksmith strikes Florens, and asks her to go. She realizes he has chosen the boy, and for the second time in her life feels abandoned. Not getting a chance to explain, she asks why she must go. The blacksmith answers “because you are a slave” (139), not meaning to Jacob and Rebekka, further saying “your head is empty and your body is wild” (139) and that she is a slave to him too. Florens says “you alone own me”, to which the blacksmith answers “own yourself woman, and leave us be” (...) “and then [he laughs], saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice” (139). Florens, leaving the blacksmith and Malaik, without shoes, undergoes a change. Talking to the blacksmith in her thoughts after hurting him and running away from him, she reflects:

But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always was my life and my security from harm, from any who looks closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eyes? Are you afraid? You should be (155).

Upon running away from his house she feels the transformation: “Seeing you stagger and bleed I run. Then walk. The float. An ice floe cut away from the riverbank in winter” (156), and finally “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (159). Vega González claims that “the fact that Florens becomes ‘feral’ suggests the idea of wilderness, freedom, and lack of enslavement. Despite her not being free in the slave system, she has finally acquired an inner freedom which is concomitant with her emotional and spiritual rebirth” (129). And although Florens will never know that her mother gave her away to save her, Florens “has finally processed her plight as orphan and will be empowered by her own narration and by her renewed self” (Vega González 131). Her change to an independent person is also clear in the fact that she does not need shoes anymore. Back on the Vaark farm she thinks:

I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress (159).

The soft and tender feet that matched the timid and docile creature, have developed into hard feet that match the “feral” (144) woman Florens has turned into.

2.6.5 Lina

Lina grows up with her Native American tribe, but when she still is a child, she witnessed her "family and all the others dying around her" (44) as they had all fallen ill. She watched as “infants fell silent first, and even as their mothers heaped earth over their bones, they too were pouring sweat and limp as maize hair” (44). Together with two young boys who also survive, they try to chase away the crows, but as the smell spreads, they have to hide in trees at night from the wolves that gather. Seeing “men in blue uniforms (...) Lina’s joy of being rescued collapsed when the soldiers (...) shot the wolves then circled the whole village with fire” (44-45). Deciding to jump into the arms of the soldiers, Lina and the boys are separated, and she loses the last of her tribes members. Traumatized by the loss of everyone she knew and loved leaves Lina terrified of being alone once more. Taken in by the Presbyterians, she conforms to their religious ideas and learns that “bathing naked in the river was sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with the was theft; that to eat corn much with one’s fingers was

perverse” (46), but worst of all the sins was idleness, so to “weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation” (46). Having become a literal orphan, the Presbyterians do not even allow her to mourn, while at the same time making her a cultural orphan. Lina becomes secretly involved with a man of “learning and position in town” (102). The first time he strikes her she blames the rum as he “would never dishonor himself so if sober” (102). He continues to beat her even without rum, and “then comes a day when he first uses his fist and then a whip” (102). Lina leaves him and walks through town “wiping blood from her nose” (192). As her eyes are swollen “she stumbles and people believe she is in liquor like so many natives and tell her so” (102). The Presbyterians “never asked what happened to her” (50), “visit the printer and offer her up for sale” (103). Before Jacob buys her, the Presbyterians “no longer let her inside their house so for weeks she sleeps where she can and eats from the bowl they leave for her on the porch. Like a dog, she says. Like a dog” (103). According to Gallego-Durán:

The depiction of Lina’s cruel mistreatment throws light on the dangerous path that women have to tread in order to survive in a sexist world which fails to condemn the victimizer. On the contrary, the blame is projected onto the victim who ultimately becomes the target for racist vituperation and abjection. (...) Lina (...) embodies the image of the “illegal female”, unable to find either protection or refuge in a gender-biased society, debased to a beastly, animal-like status. In this case, femininity and ethnicity interact to reduce her to less than human status (108).

This is in accordance with Laura Brown’s theory on insidious trauma, where the victim, Lina, gets blamed for the trauma inflicted on her by a person she should be able to trust.

Jacob purchases Lina to help out on the farm while he is awaiting his bride from England. “During all that time Lina must have said fifty words other than ‘Yes, Sir.’ Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world” (48). Having experienced several traumatic experiences, Lina copes with her trauma by selecting what memories to hold on to: “She sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out” (48). Re-inventing herself,

she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning in things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (...) She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain. The shame of having survived the destruction of her families shrank with her vow never to betray or abandon anyone she cherished” (46-47).

Her promise gets put to the test as Rebekka, after the death of Jacob, stops treating her like a friend and confidante, and again refuses Lina to “bathe in the river” (158) and use other native rituals. Rituals she herself found more useful than the “I-accept-and-will-see-you-at-Judgement-Day prayers” (78) the Anabaptists offered after the death of her children. Lina’s apparent loyalty makes Scully ponder: “Her loyalty, he believed, was not submission to Mistress or Florens; it was a sign of her own self-worth – a sort of keeping one’s word. Honor, perhaps” (149). Gallego-Durán claims that “Lina is really a deceptive character in the novel [as] she seems to be the strongest and most independent among them all, but is actually the one who suffers utter abandonment at the end of the novel, deserted by the rest of the characters including Rebekka (...) Moreover, her voice is no longer heard as the novels draws its close” (108-109). Rebekka, having become an oppressor herself, has indeed deserted her, as she has deserted everything else that she believed in before Jacob’s death. But again, the readers sense hope for Lina as Florens says “Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and as much as she needs being Mistress’ need I know she loves fire more” (159), indicating that they will create a future together with Sorrow and her daughter.

2.6.6 Jacob Vaark

Jacob, “a ratty orphan become landowner” (10) had a traumatic start to his life. His mother “was a girl of no consequence who died in childbirth” (30) and he was abandoned by his father and his side of the family (9). He knows “from his own childhood [that] there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers” (30), and that children “even if they mattered less than a milch cow to a parent or master, without an adult they were more likely to freeze to death (...), float facedown in canals, or wash up on banks and shoals” (30). He himself has three servants of different origins whom he refers to as “helpers, reliable as sunrise and strong as posts” (19), who, although not free to leave, are considered more like friends or even family than slaves. Jacob feels that “the acquisition of both [Florens and Sorrow] could be seen as a rescue” (32) and he considers himself a savior.

On one of his business travels, Jacob visits a Portuguese gentleman, Senhor D’Ortega on his estate, Jublio. D’Ortega owes Jacob money, but unable to settle his bill, he offers Jacob a slave as payment. D’Ortega does not accept Jacob’s refusal, and takes him on an inspection of his “goods”. When confronted with the slaves, slaves who had scars, [wounds] like misplaced veins tracing their skin”, slave women whose “eyes looked shockproof”, Jacob “suddenly (...) felt his stomach seize” (20). Not sure why, “he couldn’t stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great

distance. No sound, just the knowledge of the roar he could not hear” (20). Jacob will not trade humans as “flesh was not his commodity” (20), and he again states that “my trade is goods and gold” (23) when D’Ortega tries to make him accept slaves as payment. Finally, he accepts a female slave’s daughter as compensation, and Florens is brought to his farm. Envyng the D’Ortega estate, Jacob thinks it might “be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow” and “to build a house that size on his own property” (25). However, his next thought is that “access to a fleet of free labor made D’Ortega’s leisurely life possible” (25) and Jacob “sneered at wealth dependent on a captured workforce that required more force to maintain” (26). The very same day that Jacob refuses to trade in humans and is sickened by seeing D’Ortega’s beaten slaves, he lays a plan driven by his desire for a “grand house of many rooms” (33):

And the plan was as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. And there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable (33).

With this thought, Jacob enters the slave trade indirectly, and from a comfortable distance, not having to see the beaten slaves himself, but still reaping the benefits. Benefits he found despicable when they were in D’Ortega’s favor.

Rescuing orphans on the one hand and creating new ones on the other through the indirect slave trade in Barbados, Jacob seems naïve in his thinking. However, he does not seem to link slavery to color. The servants on his farm are all of different ethnicities, he also has the help of the neighboring farm’s white, indentured servants, Willard and Scully, and he hires a free black man to do blacksmith work on the gates of his new, grand home.

The irony in Jacob’s reminiscing of orphanhood as something sad and pitiful whereas he now considering himself a savior to other orphans, is that the socioeconomic status of the women on and surrounding his farm makes them more orphaned than him. It is a highly patriarchal society and although Jacob and Rebekka have a seemingly happy marriage after the standards of the time, with Rebekka savoring “the miracle of her good fortune” (92) in having Jacob as her husband, it is clear that Jacob thinks women are beneath men. While on the Jublio estate, Jacob scoffs at Mrs. D’Ortega as she speaks, “as though her political judgement were equal to a man’s” (16). Thinking about their lost children, Jacob is “confident [Rebekka] would bear more children, and at least one, a boy, would live to thrive” (19), seemingly thinking that the gender of his child is something he can decide.

Jacob acts how the sachem of Lina's deceased tribe predicts Europe to be: "cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted in purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples" (52). He has a growing need to show off his wealth by buying Rebekka nice, useless gifts, and cutting down fifty trees to build his big house despite having no heirs. The building of the house makes everybody, apart from Lina, happy, "and Sir – she had never seen him in better spirits. Not with the birth of his doomed sons, nor with his pleasure in his daughter" (42). He does not live to relish in his wealth, and he leaves behind a community that does not function properly without him due to the patriarchal standard of the times. Although Jacob is kind to those close to him, both men and women, he exploits the slave trade from a comfortable distance, keeping up the need for more imported labor. He is also aware of many slaves' horrid conditions, but this does not stop him from requiring more slaves even though he has no real need for it. Having been mistreated as an orphan in his youth, he does not internalize his oppressors' views directly at those around him, but indirectly and only at African slaves in Barbados.

2.7 "Women of and for men"

Although Rebekka praises herself lucky that "other than her mother, no one had ever struck her", she is fully aware that "wife beating was common" (93). She learns that Lina has only known one man and that he struck her. Lina tells Florens the story of her abusive lover to warn her about the blacksmith, saying "I am your age when flesh is my only hunger. Men have two hungers. The beak that grooms also bites" (103). It is not only thrashings women endure, rape is also common. Even Scully who was sent away as a twelve-year-old to "a rural area, barely populated" so that he "might at best mend his ways or at worst have no opportunity to corrupt others" (152), because of his homosexuality, decides for himself that "if he had been interested in rape, Florens would have been his prey" (150). He also makes it clear that it is his lack of interest in women that makes "his assessment of her un-rape-ability (...) impersonal" (150).

The outlook for the women on the Vaark farm is not a very bright after Jacob dies. Rebekka knows that "without the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers, a widow was in practice illegal" (96). In conversation, Willard and Scully also wonder about the prospects of Rebekka and the other women. Willard reckons Rebekka will re-marry soon because "she's a woman. How else keep the farm?" (143), knowing that

women have no rights without a man. Lina worries what will happen if Rebekka dies as well, fully aware that:

three unmastered woman and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile (56).

Women, and even free women like Rebekka, are in fact not free without belonging to a man. Women cannot own themselves, no matter the color of their skin. Rebekka, being a white European, can however own other women. So even at a time when the patriarchy was stronger than racism, there was still rank, in which whites were on top. After Rebekka survives smallpox, Florens hears from Willard and Scully that Rebekka “is putting me up for sale. But not Lina. Sorrow she wants to give away” (157). Without belonging to a man, all the women on the farm are even more orphaned, culturally. In the final chapter, A Minha Mãe observes that “to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (161). Out of the four quintessentially American women, white, black, Native and mixed race, the white woman is the only one who can re-marry and have some form of control of herself, or at least over others. The fates of the other women are completely at the hands of others. Cynthia Davis in her 1982 article “Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”, claims that “womanhood, like blackness, is Other in this society, and the dilemma of woman in a patriarchal society is parallel to that of blacks in a racist one” (329). Being both a female and black is the lowest rank. Although the society at large is not yet fully racialized in *A Mercy*, there are clear indications that it is in its infancy, but also that patriarchy is stronger than racism at this time. “*A Mercy* transmits to the reader the idea of survival amidst severe circumstances” (Vega-González 130), and even though the prospects of the women of the Vaark farm might not be great, the readers sense hope through the re-inventions and self-creations that they have undergone.

3 Beloved

3.1 Introduction

Since the publication of *Beloved* in 1987, the novel has been widely praised, reviewed and discussed. The conversation has largely been about the themes motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship; re-memory and the importance of remembering the past; community; and spirituality in regards to the character of Beloved and what or whom she represents⁵. For me it was interesting to see the changes from the story in *A Mercy* to the story in *Beloved*, and especially with regards to orphanhood and trauma and how these two themes are interlinked. I have not been able to find any previous articles focusing mainly on orphanhood in *Beloved*, perhaps because we do not deal with many literal orphans in the novel. There are articles that talk about trauma⁶, but few that talk about insidious trauma and the connection between insidious trauma and orphanhood. My focus in this chapter will therefore be on the cultural orphans, and how trauma has kept the black population in the USA as orphaned in *Beloved*.

In this chapter I will examine how the orphan trope and trauma has affected the lives of the characters in *Beloved*. The themes will be explained in regard to the novel: I will analyze some examples from the text and take a closer look at some of the characters, both male and female. I will go through a historical background of the novel, before taking a closer look on how trauma and orphanhood have shaped the lives of Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Baby Suggs, Sixo, Halle, Stamp Paid and Paul D, respectively. I will look at both singular traumatic events and insidious trauma and how these two forms of trauma are closely connected, the repetition of the former strengthening the latter.

3.2 Historical background

The main difference between *Beloved* and most of Morrison's other novels, is that it is based on a true story. The story being that of Margaret Garner, as told in the *National Anti-slavery Standard* from 1856: "The slave-mother, with her children, after long tasting the cup of servitude, at length flees desperately to a free State; she is hunted; her den of refuge is found and surrounded; she is liable to be caught" (McKay and Earle 81). Refusing to let her children

⁵ For more on these topics, see i.a. Bloom, 2004, and McKay and Andrews, 1999.

⁶ I.e. Anne T. Salvatore, 2002

experience slavery, Garner goes to extreme lengths and is reported to have cried out, “Before any of my children will be taken back to Kentucky, I will kill every one of them” (Bloom 12). Garner managed to slit the throat of her three-year-old daughter before being overpowered. It was while working as an editor at Random House Publishers that Morrison came across the story of Margaret Garner, and the foundation for *Beloved* was laid. The character of Sethe is based on Garner herself, but Morrison “intentionally avoided further researching the Garner case, allowing Sethe to emerge as a fully-imagined character” (Bloom 12).

Harold Bloom explains that Morrison was certain that *Beloved* would not be as popular as her four previous novels, due to “the silent phenomenon she called ‘national amnesia’ that surrounds the history and details of slavery” (13). Not only did the novel appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list the same week it was released in bookstores; in 1988 it won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. This happened after *Beloved* failed to win the National Book Award, which caused quite a controversy and led 48 prominent black writers to write an open letter of protest (Hevesi, web). Morrison has later commented that the “support and recognition by her own writerly community was one of the most meaningful ‘awards’ she had ever received” (Tally 2). *Beloved* was also voted “the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years” by the *New York Times Book Review* in 2006 (Peterson 1). Nancy J. Peterson explains the success:

The power of Morrison’s lyrical language, her interest in reshaping American history while telling a gripping story about human lives under slavery, her depiction of African American men and women, her innovative narrative strategies – all these elements work together to make reading and analyzing *Beloved* a deeply engaging experience (1).

The scapegoating which we began to glimpse in *A Mercy* is fully in effect in *Beloved*.

Diane Pazicky states:

During these periods [the Great Migration, the Revolution, and the rise of the republic] the orphan trope signifies the threat to the identity of the dominant culture, which eventually became the Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class (...). Those who considered themselves the natural or adopted “children” of that “family” came to fear orphanhood and needed scapegoats onto whom their identification with orphanhood could be displaced. The targets of such displacement were groups of marginalized racial, religious, and ethnic outsiders – Negroes, Indians, and immigrants (...). By becoming cultural “orphans”, they enable the “children” to protect their identity within the family of the colony or republic (xiii).

Whereas in *A Mercy*, we saw how anyone different was someone to be feared, this only applies to African Americans in *Beloved*. This corresponds to Morrison’s own views as expressed in *Playing in the Dark*:

The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness. The black population was available for meditations on terror – the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstraction of human potential and the rights of man (37-38).

Europeans set off to the New World in the millions, some fleeing oppression themselves, to find freedom and a better life. Ironically, they enslaved millions of Africans so that their freedom could be reassured “by transferring their fears of failure, powerlessness, loneliness and sin” (Mori 36) to the people they had deprived of any human rights.

The scapegoating in *Beloved* is mixed with a furthering of capitalist exploitation. All slaves had a monetary value and were sold as goods. Although women themselves were worth slightly less than men, they could produce offspring and thus new labor, so their “value [was] over and above their ability to work in the fields” (“Measuring Slavery”). African Americans are not only scapegoated as orphans, but kept in an orphan state as slave children were separated from their mothers soon after birth, often not knowing who their fathers were. Slaves were sold, traded, beaten and killed, making it impossible to keep track of any family members.

3.3 The Story

In *Beloved* we are thrown almost 200 years forward in time from *A Mercy*, and I say “thrown” because we get right into the story the moment our eyes land on the page: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children” (3). As Toni Morrison herself puts it in the foreword of *Beloved*: “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment (...) – just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, (...), without preparation or defense” (XII). The story is set in 1873, but throughout the chapters we get fragments of each of the characters lives leading up to the novel’s present, and the reader has to puzzle pieces of the past together, along with the characters themselves. Within the first few pages of the novel, we learn that Sethe and her daughter Denver are the only ones left in the house on 124 Bluestone Road in the free state Ohio. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, died eight years prior; the ghost of Sethe’s dead baby haunts the house, shattering mirrors and leaving handprints in the cake; and Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Buglar, have run away because of the haunting baby. Sethe and her daughter Denver remain 124’s “only victims” (3). Paul D, a man Sethe knows from her past as a slave on the Sweet Home plantation, arrives, 18 years after they last met, and Sethe

invites him to stay with them. Although we are thrown straight into a haunted house, Toni Morrison, true to form, does not reveal anything about the story leading up to 1873 in a neat and linear manner. It is through the characters' remembering, reminiscing and recollection that the story gets patched together

Sethe was born around 1835 to a slave woman on a plantation “[in] Carolina maybe? Or was it Louisiana?” (37). Being taken care of by “the eight-year-old child who watched over the young ones” (37), Sethe remembers little of her past. When she was 13 years old she was sold to the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky to Mr. and Mrs. Garner. Sethe is a “timely present for Mrs. Garner who had lost Baby Suggs to her husband’s high principles” (13), as Mr. Garner lets Halle, Baby Suggs son, buy his mother out of slavery by renting himself out to other farms on Sundays to work off the debt. After Baby Suggs is bought into freedom and settled in a house in Ohio, Sethe takes over as her replacement in the household. Mr. and Mrs. Garner treated their slaves reasonable compared to other plantation owners, with Mr. Garner calling his slaves *men*, compared to *boys*: “‘Y’all got boys,’ he told them. ‘Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stropping boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of them’” (12). When Sethe arrives the Sweet Home men, all five of them, “looked at the new girl and decided to let her be” (12).

And so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man. All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl – the one who took Baby Suggs’ place after Halle bought her with five years of Sundays. Maybe that was why she chose him. A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change was a serious recommendation (13).

Sethe waits a year before deciding to marry Halle Suggs at fourteen (71). Thinking “there should be some ceremony. Dancing maybe. A little sweet William in my hair” (70), Sethe was disappointed to learn that “[Mr. and Mrs. Garner] said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it. All of it” (70). Sethe and Halle have three children, Howard, Buglar, and a baby girl. While pregnant with their fourth child, Sethe, Halle, Sixo and the Pauls decide to run away. This is after Mr. Garner unexpectedly dies and a distant relative, schoolteacher, and two boys come to farm Sweet Home:

A schoolteacher, [Mrs. Garner] said. That made her feel good that her husband’s sister’s husband had book learning and was willing to come farm Sweet Home after Mr. Garner passed. The men could have done it, even with Paul F sold. But it was like Halle said. She didn’t want to be the only white person on the farm and a woman too (44).

Schoolteacher keeps a book about the slaves, but they “just thought it was his manner to ask us questions” (44), so they are oblivious to the fact that it is about them. Walking past schoolteacher teaching for the two white boys, Sethe stops to listen upon hearing her name and schoolteacher saying, ““No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics in the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228). Sethe finally understands why he has been measuring the slaves, remembering that “schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, ‘cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth” (226). Realizing that he sees them merely as animals, Sethe is so shamed by it that she “never told Halle or nobody” (228).

Schoolteacher changes the life of the slaves on the Sweet Home farm. Having gone from being treaded like Mr. Garner’s men, “schoolteacher [...] taught them otherwise. A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye; they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race” (147-148). Having led a comparatively decent life, the slaves never thought about running away before schoolteacher took over the farm with Sethe remembering, “I don’t know what we thought – but getting away was a money thing to us. Buy out. Running was nowhere on our minds” (232). It is not until Paul A gets beaten by schoolteacher and later hanged that they start talking about running. As Sethe has become pregnant with her fourth child by the time they are supposed to run, the plan changes a little.

Just enough to butter Halle’s face, (...) and make Sixo laugh at last. But I got you [Beloved] out, baby. And the boys too. When the signal for the train come, you all was the only ones ready. (...) So I sent you on the wagon with the woman who waited in the corn. Ha ha. No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither (233).

After the children are sent off to the free state Ohio, the slaves return to Sweet Home. Sethe has still been nursing her youngest daughter and the milk keeps leaking out through her dress. The two white boys on the farm “came in here and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it” (19). Sethe tells Mrs. Garner about this, and schoolteacher finds out. Telling this to Paul D almost 20 years later, Sethe explains:

“Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (20).

Sethe manages to run away shortly after, but as Halle or no one else shows up, she has to escape alone. Discussing this with Paul D later, Sethe finds out that Halle has seen the boys molesting her and taking her milk:

“He couldn’t get out the loft.”

“Loft? What loft?”

“The one over your head. In the barn (...)”

“He saw?”

“He saw.”

“He told you?”

“You told me.”

“What?”

“The day I came in here. You said they stole your milk. I never knew what it was that messed him up. That was it, I guess (...)”

“If he’s alive, and saw that, he won’t step foot in my door. Not Halle.”

“It broke him, Sethe. (...) You may as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face” (81-82).

Having endured insidious trauma her whole life, the singular traumatic experiences of the beating and the taking of her milk leaves Sethe with no choice. Alone, pregnant in the sixth month, beaten and ashamed, Sethe manages to escape for Ohio. She collapses on the way, with a bleeding back, swollen feet, and leaking breasts. Hearing what she thinks is the sound of a white boy’s voice she is sure her days are over. It turns out to be a white escaped indentured servant, Amy Denver, who is going to Boston to get some velvet (40). Amy helps Sethe by getting her out of the snake filled path on the “bloody side of the Ohio river” (37), and into a shelter. She massages Sethe’s feet “until she cried salt tears” upon which Amy replies “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (42). Amy stays with Sethe through the night, and when they reach the river the following afternoon, Sethe goes into labor giving birth to a baby whom she names Denver after the white woman. Amy leaves them in the evening and Sethe manages to cross the river the next day by the help of Stamp Paid, a member of the Underground Railroad. With further help from Ella, another member of the Underground Railroad, she reaches her mother-in-law’s house at night and she and Denver are carefully taken care of by Baby Suggs. She meets her children in the morning and “she kept kissing them” (110).

Within the first half of the novel we learn that Sethe and her children have escaped in 1855, Baby Suggs died in 1865, the brothers run away from home a few years after Baby Suggs’ death, and Sethe’s first daughter is dead and haunts the house on 124 Bluestone Road. Paul D, “the last of the Sweet Home men” (7) finds the house and Sethe 18 years after they last met and he chases the baby ghost away and moves into the house with Sethe and Denver.

Denver does not warm to Paul D, so as an icebreaker, he treats the Denver, her mother and himself to a day at the carnival. When they get back a mysterious woman stands outside 124, and “the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity” and just like “there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb (...), there was no stopping now” (61). The woman is taken inside and studied by the three while she drinks “cup after cup of water” (61). Sethe notices that she has “sleepy eyes”, “her skin was flawless” and “her feet were like her hands, soft and new” (62). When asked about her name, she says “Beloved” with a “voice so low and rough each one looked at the other two” (62). Sethe, “deeply touched by her sweet name”, and remembering the inscription on her dead baby girl’s gravestone, “made her feel especially kindly toward her” (63):

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten ‘Dearly’ too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible – that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby’s headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. (...) That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust (5).

Being sleepy, weak and thirsty, Paul D and Sethe wonder if Beloved might have croup or cholera. Denver exclaims, “She’s not sick!” (64), and tends to Beloved while she sleeps for days and cleans up in secret when Beloved wets herself. Denver seems to already have realized who Beloved really is, that she is the reincarnation of her dead baby sister.

Beloved stays on to Paul D’s dismay, who asks Sethe in an irritable voice, “You just gonna feed her? From now on?” Sethe replies “Denver likes her. She’s no real trouble” (67), and Beloved stays as “there didn’t seem anyplace for her to go” (66). Beloved always keeps close to Sethe: “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to” (68). While dosing off, Sethe feels Beloved’s touch on her shoulder: “A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. Sethe stirred and looked around. First at Beloved’s soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless” (69). Beloved keeps asking Sethe about things from her past, and Sethe tells her stories: “It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) 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” (69).

It is not until halfway through the book that we learn what happened to Sethe's baby girl. Twenty-eight days after Sethe's arrival in Ohio, her former owner comes looking for her:

When the four horsemen came – schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff – the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late. (...) Both [Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid] were staring at the same place – a woodshed. (...) Then all four started toward the shed. Inside, 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. She did not look at them, she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time (...). [T]he woman – something was wrong with her. She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (174-176).

Thinking all the children were murdered, meaning he has lost all of the slaves he came to claim, schoolteacher and the nephew return to Sweet Home. For him, Sethe killing her children, was "all testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (177). Paul D, having been oblivious as to why Sethe's daughter died, finds out something has happened from an old newspaper clipping that Stamp Paid shows him. Unable to read, he asks Sethe about what it says. She explains that when she saw schoolteacher and the others coming, she "collected every bit of life she had made (...) and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (192). Sethe says, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193), trying to kill all of them but only succeeding in killing her eldest daughter. Paul D, shocked at what he's learned, answers, "Your love is too thick" (193), to which Sethe replies, "Too thick? (...) Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (194). The revealing of the baby girl's fate makes Paul D leave 124.

The women, left alone in the house, get tangled in love and desire for one another. Sethe has realized that Beloved is her baby girl come back to life:

Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. (...) She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. (...) I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear happen to her (236).

After a while, Denver gets cut "out of the games" (282). Sethe has lost her job and she spends all of her savings "to feed themselves with fancy food and decorate themselves with ribbons and dress goods" (282). Beloved makes demands, and Sethe does anything to please her.

Denver concludes that “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (295). Having run out of money, they soon run out of food. Denver, hardly having left 124 in “a dozen years” (288), takes it upon herself to get help and she goes to Lady Jones, who had once schooled her. Denver asks if she can do some work for a little food. Having shut 124 Bluestone Road and its inhabitants out ever since Sethe murdered her baby daughter, the community, upon learning that Denver is asking for help, helps out as well:

Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up. In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course” (293-294)

Having made a bridge between the community and 124, Denver keeps getting more and more work and help. Finally, word gets out that Beloved is back and angry at her mother. Ella “convinced the others that rescue was in order” (301) and gathers “thirty neighborhood women” (308), and together they stand outside 124 and sing until Sethe and Beloved come out of the house. Beloved is naked, smiling and appears to be pregnant. At the same time, Mr. Bodwin who owns the house, comes by. Sethe mistakes him for schoolteacher, and runs toward him with an icepick. Denver and Ella topple her just before she reaches him, and while the ruckus takes place, Beloved disappears.

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 (...). It was not a story to pass on (323).

Denver blossoms out in society and takes on several jobs. She has boys interested in her and she does what she can for her mother. Paul D goes back to Sethe to help her as she seems to have given up on life. Sad that Beloved has left her as “she was my best thing” (321), Sethe just lies in Baby Suggs’ old bed feeling tired and resting. Wanting to “put his story next to hers” (322), Paul D returns to 124 to take care of Sethe and create a future with her.

3.4 Representing historical orphanhood and trauma

Perhaps the most telling quote in *Beloved* about orphanhood and trauma is when we learn the painful realization Baby Suggs has about the familial structure for the slaves:

In all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t been run off or

been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children (27-28).

Morrison's novel represents a historical fact: orphanhood was the case for most of the African Americans at the time the novel is set, as slavery was just starting to come to an end in a few states. Even freed slaves did not know where they came from or what had happened to their children. Slave children were often a result of rape by one or several white men, and if you were lucky enough to find a partner out of love, that was no guarantee that you would stay together or keep the children by that man. Ella, who shut Sethe out after the infanticide, and "understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it" (301-302), has herself spent puberty "in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called 'the lowest yet'" (301). She was repeatedly raped and got pregnant as a result of the abuse: "She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet'. It lived five days never making a sound" (305). These experiences of rape and abuse represented in the novel are surely singular traumatic events, but can also be considered insidious trauma, as these horrible ordeals are something that had been common throughout slavery, in accordance with Laura Brown's before mentioned theory. As slaves have no freedom over themselves, and all family structures were usually broken down for both men and women, insidious trauma is inflicted through slavery itself.

After slavery was abolished with the end of the Civil War, many whites still didn't acknowledge black people as equals. Even nine years after the War has ended, Stamp Paid despairs about how white people act:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. (...) 'What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?' (212-213).

Having gained their freedom, African Americans were still held down by laws and legislations. They could not vote and racism was still raging throughout the country. Even abolitionists like the Bodwins, the white brother and sister who helped the Underground Railroad, "hated slavery worse than they hated slaves" (162). Although they hired black people to do work for them and rent out 124 Bluestone Road to Baby Suggs and Sethe, they have a derogatory statue in their hallway: "a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was

thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets (...) And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery (...) Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words ‘At Yo Service’” (300). According to Trudier Harris, this is the image of *Sambo*, showing how “black people [were] controlled by white people” (“Escaping slavery” 336), and further “Sambo is ever self-effacing, ever obsequious and subservient, ever willing ‘to grin and bear it’, ever willing to be trampled on by whites because its irrepressible spirit will rise up and beg to be degraded again” (336). Although the Bodwins were abolitionists, this does not necessarily mean that they supported social equality, showing that even as free and with decent white people by their side, black people were still treated unfairly.

3.4.1 Sethe

Sethe is the only character we know that inflicts trauma as well as suffers it. By killing her daughter because she believed that if she hadn’t, “she would have died” (236), she sets off a pain in Baby Suggs, her sons, and Denver that changes their lives. Although Sethe clearly does not regret her actions, telling Paul D eighteen years after the infanticide, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (193), she herself seems to be suffering from what she did. After she realizes that Beloved is her dead baby daughter come back to life, Sethe nearly loses her mind trying to explain why she did what she did even though she thinks, “she come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing” (236). Giving Beloved everything she demands and more, Sethe gets tangled in her own, thick love for Beloved so much so that she doesn’t see what is really happening. Denver, having been part of the threesome until “[Sethe and Beloved] cut [her] out of the games” (282), observes the relationship between Sethe and Beloved:

Sethe began to talk, explain how much she had suffered, been through, for her children, waving away flies in grape arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to (...). And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to [leave Beloved] – that she had to get them out, away (...). Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons (284).

It is Sethe’s “too thick” love (193) for her children that lead her to committing the infanticide. In the story we learn that Sethe is not the only one who has killed her own child. Both Sethe’s mother and Ella have “thrown away” babies or refused to nurse them as the children have been a direct result of the traumatic experience of multiple rapes by white men in control of the slaves. Baby Suggs also mothers a child as a result of rape, and although she does not kill

it, she “could not love” (28) it. What differs from Sethe’s infanticide is that she has her children by a black man that she loves, and rather than lacking love for her children, she loves them so much that she would rather see them dead than have them alive as slaves. Susana Vega-González compares Sethe’s act of infanticide to the choice A Minha Mãe makes in *A Mercy*, namely giving her daughter away to a stranger as there “is no protection but there is difference” (*A Mercy* 164). Vega-González claims that this act “ultimately represents the scarce options these mothers have to create a happier more decent life for their female offspring. They entail acts of profound love deeper than the love for oneself” (120). It is clear that whether the children are killed at the hands of their mothers out of too little or too much love, traumatic acts done onto the mothers are the instigators for these actions.

Sethe is clearly troubled by her choice, not in the sense that she regrets it, but that she feels guilty about it. She left herself, Baby Suggs and Denver become separated from the community, made her two sons run away and has spent almost her entire free life living in a house that is haunted by the ghost of her dead baby daughter. Once Sethe realizes that Beloved is her murdered child come back as flesh and bones, she does everything she can to mend the past, giving into Beloved’s every wish and desire, almost forgetting about her still-alive daughter, Denver, and herself.

According to Anne T. Salvatore, Sethe, in order to cope with her personal trauma that stems both from her race, gender, and the infanticide, “[separates] herself from authentic seeing and feeling through an attempt – albeit an unsuccessful one – to repress traumatic memories; her secondary strategy arises from the first – she withdraws from any involvement with her community” (166). The cutting of all ties to the African American community is both a coping strategy and something that keeps her culturally orphaned, and also adds to her pain. Remembering “the twenty-eight days of having women friends (...); of being part of a neighborhood” as “twenty-eight happy days” (204), Sethe has settled into a “solitary life” (204) in the eighteen years following. She spends her days “beating back the past” (86), and “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (51), doing her very best not to remember anything about her life prior to her escape from Sweet Home.

Sethe has not had a chance to be a daughter, barely remembering her mother who is hanged when Sethe is a little girl. According to Andrea O’Reilly, “this yearning to be a daughter originates from Sethe’s own displaced identity. Her self has no familial or ancestral grounding” (88). Sethe is a literal orphan as well as a cultural one. She sees her mother hanged, and she knows nothing of her father other than the fact that he was black and her mother “put her arms around him” (74). She does know, however, that her father was the only

man her mother put her arms around and that Sethe was the only child she kept. Nan, a woman who came with her mother “from the sea” (74), tells Sethe that her mother, after being repeatedly raped by the white crewmembers during the Middle Passage, “threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of a black man” (74). Sethe has forgotten everything about her mother until Beloved asks her, “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” (72). Denver has never before heard anything about Sethe’s mother and Sethe starts “remembering something she had forgotten she knew” (73). Sethe remembers that her Ma’am, Nan and other slaves “used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now” (74). Although Sethe doesn’t remember her past before Sweet Home until she digs it up on Beloved’s enquiries, she has unconsciously brought with her some memories of her ancestral history. When she is pregnant with Denver and escaping to Ohio, she refers to her baby as “the little antelope” (36), “and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one” (37). She recalls the slaves “on that place where she was born” (37) singing and dancing:

Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the *antelope*. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did (37, italics added).

Sethe is almost more culturally orphaned than many of the other slaves. She remembers little of the community where she lived before Sweet Home, “Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?” (37), and at Sweet Home, Sethe is the only female slave, something she finds difficult especially when it comes to bringing up children. Sethe tells Paul D: “I wish I’d known more, but, like I say, there wasn’t nobody to talk to. Women, I mean” (188), and “it’s hard, you know what I mean? By yourself and no woman to help you get through” (187). If Sethe brought food out into the field to the working men, “they never took it from her hands. They stood back and waited for her to put it on the ground (...) and leave” (27). Sethe would hide and watch them, wondering at “how different they were without her, how they laughed and urinated and sang” (27), seemingly leading a very lonely life and cut off from the other slaves’ reminiscence of ancestral ties and their communal bond. She marries Halle, but they see “each other in full daylight only on Sundays. The rest of the time they spoke or touched or ate in darkness” (31), not sharing much more than a bed.

After arriving in Ohio, Sethe quickly becomes integrated in the black community, much thanks to Baby Suggs and her important role as a spiritual leader they call “Baby Suggs,

holy” (102). This only lasts until the pivotal day of the infanticide and Sethe is cut off further from the community in her free life as well. Not only do the neighborhood men and women stop to include Sethe in the community, Sethe does not make any effort herself to be a part of it. Sethe even steals from her employer, “matches, sometimes a bit of kerosene, a little salt, butter too” (223), to avoid standing in line “with all the other Negroes” (225) at the general store as she didn’t want to “feel their judgment or their pity” (225). Ella mistakes Sethe’s lack of interest in the community as pride as Sethe “made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone”, and therefore “Ella junked her and wouldn’t give her the time of day” (302). Sethe does admit to having pride as “she despised herself for the pride that made pilfering better than standing in line at the window of the general store” (225), but it seems her pride is more directed at the whites as “she just didn’t want the embarrassment of waiting out back of Phelps store with the others till every white in Ohio was served before the keeper turned to the cluster of Negro faces looking through a hole in his back door” (223-224).

On writing about the past, Anne Salvatore claims that:

Morrison indicates the strength of the connections time has on our lives by suggesting that if a character denies the past, no authentic future is possible either. Thus, Sethe’s attempt to forget the disastrous chain of events following her flight from Sweet Home lurks in her psyche, paralyzing thought and preventing her from dreaming about or planning for a better life (168).

It is easy to see that a real future is not within range for Sethe as she believes that “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (51), rather than try to deal with the past and reintegrate with the community. But as both Paul D and Beloved make Sethe remember her past, both good and bad things, one would expect Sethe to start seeing a brighter future. At one point she does consider a future with Paul D (51), but after having told him about the infanticide, which led him to leave, and then to realize who Beloved is, Sethe shuts out any idea of him and a future in the community:

Paul D convinced me there was a world out there and that I could live in it. Should have known better. *Did* know better. Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be (215).

In the end after Beloved has been chased away by the community women, Paul D returns to Sethe to take care of her. She is lying in Baby Suggs old bed and tells Paul D, “I don’t have no plans. No plans at all” (320), signaling that she still cannot think about the future. Paul D wants to make a future with Sethe, telling her that they “need some kind of tomorrow” and while stroking her face, he says “You your best thing, Sethe. You are”, to which Sethe,

seemingly surprised, replies “Me? Me?” (322). After the disappearance of Beloved, Sethe is accepted back into the community. This may lead her level of ethnic identity strength to increase, thus providing further protection against symptoms of trauma, in accordance with Watson et.al.’s before-mentioned study. Also, with Denver out in the community becoming a strong woman, and Paul D by Sethe’s side to work on both the past and the future, there might be some hope of Sethe coping with her pain and re-claiming her Self.

3.4.2 Denver

Denver is the last child Sethe gives birth to, and the last child to stay on at 124 Bluestone Road. In the beginning we get a sense that Denver is a lonely child, possessive of her mother, and to Paul D she is a “child half out of her mind” (18). No one has visited 124 in twelve years (14), and seeing her brothers leave one by one and her Grandma Baby die, Denver thinks “none of that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright *long* for a sign of spite from the baby ghost” (15). Soon after Paul D appears on the steps of 124, Denver starts to cry and long for the baby ghost as her mother and Paul D act like “a twosome, saying ‘Your daddy’ and ‘Sweet Home’ in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her” (15). Denver never takes to liking Paul D as she feels he takes her mother from her.

It is not until well into Part Two of the novel that we learn that Denver is in fact scared of her mother rather than the baby ghost and this is what keeps her from leaving the house:

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. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to. Maybe it was getting that close to dying made them want to fight the War. That’s what they told me they were going to do. I guess they rather be around killing men than killing women, and there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own. All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don’t know what it is (...). Whatever it is it comes from outside this house, outside the yard (...). So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too (242).

This is contrary to what we learn on the very first page of the novel, as we get told that it is the baby ghost’s haunting that chases the brothers away: “Each one fled at once – the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time” (3). It could be both their fear of Sethe and their fear of the baby ghost, as the ghost is a

direct link to Sethe's killing of her own daughter and a constant reminder for the boys that it could have been their fate too.

This fear of Sethe makes Denver side with Beloved and protect her from what she fears will be violence in her mother. After seeing Beloved try to choke Sethe in the Clearing, thinking that Beloved wants to kill Sethe in return for her own death, Denver still protects Beloved, thinking, "But then she kissed her neck and I have to warn her about that. Don't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children" (243). Ashraf Rushdy claims that there are two crucial moments in Denver's life. The first one being the one just mentioned, when Denver starts to get a hint that Beloved might be a danger to Sethe, but still chooses to protect Beloved. As it becomes more and more clear for Denver that Beloved demands more from Sethe than Sethe can give, "little by little it dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might" (285). This opens up for the second crucial moment in Denver's life, "when she must assume responsibility for having nurtured resentment, for having kept the past alive for selfish reasons" (Rushdy 581). This realization that Beloved might pose a real threat to her mother, is the push Denver needs to go out into the community and ask for help. Denver, however, freezes up on the porch and cannot move. She suddenly hears "Baby Suggs [laugh], clear as anything" (287). Denver tells her grandmother:

But you said there was no defense.
"There ain't."
Then what do I do?
"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (288)

By going out into the community, Rushdy claims that the "know it" that Baby Suggs proclaims,

is understanding the forces of slavery that compelled her mother to do what she did. There is another story besides Beloved's, a larger narrative besides her family's, a deeper pain than suspicion and fear and spite. She follows her grandmother's advice and leaves the yard. By leaving the house, she enables herself to know (582).

Denver has initially done what Sethe does; she tries to repress the past wanting to know the answers to "questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested Denver" (141). Denver is prompted to remember by "an immediate pain to her present life and an incipient danger to her future" (Rushdy 579), and she has to remember and learn both her own history and her mother's in order to move forward into the future.

Denver wasn't initially scared of her mother. Being only about a month old when Sethe killed her big sister, and never hearing Sethe or Baby Suggs talk about the infanticide, she doesn't know what has happened until she is seven years old. Tired of the ghost, Denver ventures out on her own, "looking for the house other children visited but her" (120). She gets invited in by Lady Jones, who "did what whitepeople thought unnecessary if not illegal: crowded her little parlor with the colored children who had time for and interest in book learning" (120). Going to school for a year, Denver was proud that she had done something all on her own and gotten support for it from her family. "She was so happy she didn't even know she was being avoided by her classmates" (120), until finally, a boy as smart as herself, named Nelson Lord, asks her, "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (123). Denver is scared to ask her mother about it at first, because "the thing that leapt up in her when [Nelson] asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along" (121). After a few days, Denver musters the courage to ask Sethe, but "she could not hear Sethe's answer, nor Baby Suggs' words, nor anything at all thereafter. For two years she walked in a silence to solid for penetration" (121). The realization of what her mother has done clearly traumatizes Denver, and Denver begins to fix her concentration on the baby ghost rather than the nightmares she has about Sethe:

She cut my head off every night. Buglar and Howard told me she would and she did (...). I know she'll be good at it, careful. That when she cuts it off it'll be done right; it won't hurt. After she does it I lie there for a minute with just my head. Then she carries it downstairs to braid my hair. I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it (243-244).

Nancy J. Peterson says that it is ironic and tragic that "Sethe's claims to love her children freely result in Denver's deeply rooted fear of loving her mother" (Peterson 37). Sethe has also almost turned 124 into Sweet Home for Denver as Denver is trapped inside the house for twelve years out of fear of what could be out there.

Finally getting out into the community, Denver quickly realizes that in order to get the help she needs, she has to reveal that Sethe's murdered baby daughter has come back in the flesh and is now tormenting Sethe. The word quickly spreads and the community women gather outside of 124 to perform their exorcism. By talking about the past and becoming a part of the community again, Denver manages to start her healing process. When she meets Nelson Lord again, he says: "'Take care of yourself, Denver,' but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind" (297). Denver has finally begun to find a sense of her Self,

and according to Rushdy “This encounter demonstrates Denver’s growth. She knows now her shared history – her family’s, her community’s, her culture’s” (585). A cultural orphan rather than a literal one, Denver re-invents, or rather re-discovers, herself by becoming part of the communal family. Denver tells Paul D that Miss Bodwin is teaching her “book stuff. ‘She says I might go to Oberlin’” (314), leaving the reader with the impression that despite her painful past, Denver’s future remain full of hope.

3.4.3 Baby Suggs

According to Nancy Peterson, “Morrison’s novel shares a commitment to extend the practice of mothering beyond biological ties in order to nurture individuals in need and to draw the community together” (32). Baby Suggs is an excellent example of this, as she is the matriarchal figure for all the men at Sweet Home; the black community in Ohio after she is freed; and for Sethe and her children when they join her at 124 Bluestone Road. Peterson further points out that “even though slavery has forced her to bear children while at the same time denying her the opportunity to mother them, Baby Suggs does not relinquish her mothering abilities altogether” (32). She treats Sethe like her own daughter helping her nurse her children and connecting them to the black community.

After deciding that “because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tounge’, she had nothing left but her heart – which she put to work at once” (102), Baby Suggs holds sermons in the Clearing for other former slaves:

“Here”, she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love the. Raise them up and kiss them (...). This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved” (103-104).

Although preaching that self love is important, love is also a painful feeling. Baby Suggs, having realized that everyone she ever loved has been snatched away from her one way or the other, contemplates about her children:

Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for *hearing* that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her – only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not (28).

Not having seen her children, apart from Halle, since they were little, “‘All I remember’, Baby Suggs has said, ‘is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Her little hands I would not know if they slapped me.’”(207). Baby Suggs tired at last, a tiring set off by Sethe killing her own baby girl, lays in her bed all day in the end, only seeking comfort in specks of color:

After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child (...) – to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them (...), and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy (209).

Having lost, regained, and lost her family again, Baby Suggs finally tires out completely when the African American community shuts her out after the infanticide. The community has worked as a surrogate family for her as well as her having functioned as a mother for them. It is the breaking of this last familial tie that breaks Baby Suggs completely, leaving her in her bed only contemplating color. She blames the whites for the trauma they have inflicted upon the black community: “‘Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,’ she said, ‘and broken my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks’” (104-105). Stamp Paid, having first blamed Baby Suggs for giving up the Word, realizes too late that it was “the whitefolks [who] tired her out at last” as “the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed” (212).

After being freed, Baby Suggs claims herself. When Mr. Garner is taking her to Ohio, she asks him why they call her Jenny, to which he replies “‘Cause that what’s on your sales ticket, gal. Ain’t that your name? What you call yourself?’ ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I don’t call myself nothing’” (167). Having been called *Baby* by her husband, and taking the name *Suggs* after him, Baby Suggs decides to name herself precisely that. Baby Suggs could not understand why Halle would buy her out of slavery, but

when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t (...), knew that there was nothing like it in this world (...). [S]uddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.” Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? (166).

Having felt her heart beating for the first time, she decides to put it to good use and create “her own brand of preaching” (173), starting her own congregation, so to speak, to preach self-love in the clearing and to tend to her new family – the community.

3.4.4 Beloved

Whereas all the characters we encounter represent different aspects of slavery, *Beloved* is the character that best represents all of slavery. There are four ways of reading *Beloved* and her presence. The first one is that she is Sethe’s murdered, unnamed baby girl who spends over eighteen years haunting the house on 124 Bluestone Road as a “lonely and rebuked” (16) baby. She shatters mirrors; leaves little handprints in the cake; throws things around (3); slammed the dog so hard into the wall that two of his legs broke, his eyes got dislocated and he chewed up his own tongue because he went into convulsion (14); making Sethe wonder “Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage?” (5). After “a table rushed toward him” (22) the first day Paul D came to 124, he chases the baby ghost away by “whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet” (22).

When Denver, Sethe, and Paul D come back from the carnival they see *Beloved* standing “near the steps of 124” (61). It is Sethe’s reaction to seeing the young woman that first leads the reader onto the idea that it is the baby ghost come back as a twenty-year-old woman. Sethe immediately has to urinate, and not even making it to the outhouse she has to squat in front of it, and “the water she voided was endless” (61). She remembers when Denver was born, and thinks “there was no stopping water breaking from a womb, and there was no stopping now” (61). *Beloved* spells out her name when she is asked what she is called, the same way the engraver would have chiseled each letter on her tomb stone, one by one. There is also the notion that she seems brand new, with flawless skin, her feet and hands soft and new (62), she sleeps for days, and even soils herself like a baby. The reader gets little hints that she is the reincarnated spirit of the baby. Just before Sethe realizes *Beloved* is her lost daughter, *Beloved* gets “so agitated she behaved like a two-year-old” (116), the same age she was when she was murdered. We also get a sense that *Beloved* has indeed been dead and buried. Denver asks her why she calls herself *Beloved*, to which *Beloved* replies: “In the dark my name is *Beloved*” (88). Denver asks what it was like where she was before. “‘Dark,’ said *Beloved*. ‘I’m small in that place. I’m like this here.’ She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up. (...). ‘Nothing to breath down there and no room to move in’ (...). ‘A lot of people is down there. Some is dead’” (88). *Beloved* paints a picture of being in a coffin, buried in a graveyard.

The second way of reading *Beloved* is a more literal one. Until Sethe realizes that *Beloved* is her daughter she thinks that “*Beloved* had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purpose, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind” (140). Stamp Paid tells Paul D that the appearance of *Beloved* coincides with an incident he heard about: “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup” (277). As everyone we encounter in the novel, apart from Denver, are former slaves, we learn that the idea of keeping someone locked up in a house with a white man is not at all far fetched. Ella experienced exactly that, and black women have been raped and misused so much by white men that it does not even strike them as unlikely.

The third way of reading *Beloved* is that she was literally a part of the Middle Passage, and she got separated from her mother, which she now mistakes for Sethe. Telling Denver about the hot, dark and cramped space she was in before was not a grave, as Denver interpreted it, but a slave ship coming from Africa. In Part Two of the novel, *Beloved* has a stream-of-consciousness monologue where the language is broken, without punctuation and confusing. It is a traumatized language rendered by a highly traumatizing event. The chapter starts off with *Beloved* remembering a woman who picks flowers and we gather that it is her mother as *Beloved* thinks, “her face is my own and I want to be in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (248). The next paragraph depicts a confined space and a dead man lying on top of her. *Beloved* recollects “some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none” (248). The men without skin being white men, something we recall from *A Minha Mãe’s* account of the Middle Passage in *A Mercy*: “we see men we believe are ill or dead. We soon learn they are neither. Their skin was confusing” (*A Mercy* 162). Like Sethe’s mother who “was taken up many times by the crew” (74), *Beloved* experiences sexual abuse as well: “he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces” (251). By the end of *Beloved’s* stream-of-consciousness, we seem to have been moved to 1873 and the bridge near 124:

I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up (...) I am not dead I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe’s is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me (252).

Elizabeth House claims that “Beloved is haunted by the loss of her African parents and thus comes to believe that Sethe is her mother. Sethe longs for her dead daughter and is rather easily convinced that Beloved is the child she has lost” (22). Beloved thinking Sethe is her mother and Sethe believing Beloved is her daughter is simply a case of mistaken identity. House further states that this is a possibility, as although slave trade was banned after January 1, 1808, illegal imports still took place as late as the 1860’s (House 25). Beloved was about two when she was killed, and telling Denver “I’m small in that place” (88) she would have been a child in the 1850’s when the last of the slave ships from Africa made it to America.

The last way of reading Beloved’s story is that Beloved represents the entire African motherline that was severed by the Middle Passage and the slave trade. Andrea O’Reilly claims that “the historical trauma of motherline loss is represented through the character of Beloved while the psychological trauma of this loss is conveyed through the character Sethe” (85), further Beloved is “a symbolic representation of the broken motherline (...). She is the ‘flesh and blood’ embodiment of the African American motherline, signifying both its rupture and its healing” (86). Deborah Horvitz also claims that “Beloved stands for every African woman whose story will never be told. She is the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds – generations of mothers and daughters – hunted down and stolen from Africa” (157).

Whether one chooses to read the story as a story of a reincarnated ghost; a black girl abused by a white man; an African girl who came over on the Middle Passage; or a symbolic notion of the entire African motherline, the similarities are striking in whichever interpretation. Namely, trauma lies at the bottom of each reading, whether it is read as singular notions of trauma or insidious trauma. Beloved helps the other characters remember their past to allow them to experience a true future, but her story is “not a story to pass on” as she is “disremembered and unaccounted for” (323).

3.4.5 Male trauma and orphanhood

Although the main focus in *Beloved* is on women, we most certainly touch on the lives of men as well, and meet a rather large selection of characters that are, or have been, subject to slavery. According to April Lidinsky, “most critics have emphasized the matrilineal connections in *Beloved*, [but] Toni Morrison’s text is also richly suggestive with regards to the various effects of slavery’s disciplinary tactics on masculinity” (202). In this section we will take a closer look at the male slaves, in particular Sixo and Halle, who do not get out of slavery alive, and Stamp Paid and Paul D, who manage to escape into freedom.

Slavery worked in the sense that it was matrilineal, “with the child’s status determined by the mother, which protected masters who fathered children by slaves from obligations of paternity and ensured that slave children would have no legal rights” (Pazicky 180). Further, this helped keep slaves out of the “family equation” as the dominant, white society “predicated its identity on a patriarchal model of family government and passed down power, property, and citizenship from father to son” (Pazicky 180). The privileges that were passed down from father to son, was only a privilege to whites during slavery. Nancy Peterson observes: “given the severe constraints the system of slavery placed upon black men, we might wonder how, or if, they could preserve any sense of themselves as autonomous individuals, as men, as lovers and husbands, as fathers, as sons” (63).

Paul D is “the last of the Sweet Home men” (7), originally made up of Paul D Garner, Paul A Garner, Paul F Garner, Halle and Sixo. The three Pauls share the same first name, “signifying the dehumanizing practices of slavery” (Peterson, 70), and further they all share their master’s last name of Garner. According to Jewell Parker Rhodes this creates an irony as sharing names seemingly creates a father-son bond, but “while a white son might enjoy inheritance from his father, Garner’s black sons are disenfranchised. The patriarchal authority is not benevolent or fatherly but manipulative and exploitative” (79). This keeps the slaves out of the family that is the nation, and keeps them in an orphaned state as well as the severing of real family ties. Rhodes also points out that Sixo is the only slave without a surname and that he, ironically, “seems more connected to a lineage” (79). This is further enhanced by Sixo’s manner. He has a “connection to ancestral spirits” (Peterson 64), asking permission from the “Redmen’s Presence” (29) to enter a stone structure and bring his woman there. Sixo also goes “among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open” (30), and “he stopped speaking English because there was no future in it” (30), indicating that he, as the only one of the Sweet Home men, remembers his original home, traditions and language in Africa. He is also the only one who talks back to schoolteacher. After he gets caught roasting a pig for food, he denies that he has stolen it, and tells schoolteacher that he is “improving [his] property” (224), further explaining:

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.” Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined (224-225).

According to Peterson, it is Sixo’s remembering the past that makes him resistant to slavery (64). After being caught while trying to escape, Sixo is tied up and the whitemen light a fire

beneath him. Sixo starts singing, then laughing before he shouts out “Seven-O!” (267), as he knows his woman is pregnant, prompting the “[whitemen] to shoot him to shut him up” (267). Trudier Harris claims that this indicates that Sixo’s “spirit cannot be conquered even if his body is destroyed. He is the ultimate man” (“Escaping slavery” 179).

Nancy J. Peterson compares Sixo to Halle: “If Sixo is a model of defiant black manhood, then Halle depicts the vulnerability of the slave who tries to follow all the rules but ends up suffering cruelly anyway” (65). While Garner is still alive, he lets Halle buy his mother free of slavery with “five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change” (13). Halle is the only one of the slaves who has managed to keep some of his family structure into adulthood. He has his name after Baby Suggs’ husband, and although not his father, this implicates the love Baby Suggs had for her son. He spends his life until adulthood with his mother, a stark contrast to Sethe and the other slaves, who are only nursed by their mothers until they are a few weeks old. After he buys his mother free, Sethe replaces her on the farm, and they get married. Together, Halle and Sethe create a new family with three children and a fourth on the way. Having considered buying someone out of slavery as the only way of becoming free, schoolteacher changes that idea for Halle. After schoolteacher takes over, Halle is no longer allowed to work on Sundays, rendering the only way possible to settle the remaining debt a sale, of either himself or one of his children. This realization is what prompts Halle to join Sixo’s plan of escaping. Halle never makes the escape, and no one knows why until Paul D and Sethe meet 18 years later and Paul D pieces together what has happened. Sethe gets angry knowing that Halle saw the whiteboys steal her milk and not having done anything about it. Paul D defends Halle, saying “Let me tell you something. A man ain’t a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside” (81). Halle, having been the only one with family around him, gets broken when he cannot protect his wife, showing another heinous effect of slavery - the emasculation of the male slaves. Jewell Parker Rhodes explains the emasculation as such:

Black men were often forced into an impotent role since to struggle against white violence meant risking their own lives. So black men were forced to choose between protecting their family or self-survival. While choosing self-survival is a natural reaction, it creates guilt and a more frustrating sense of impotence since within slave society, black men can never correct the guilt or alter the dilemma (89).

Stamp Paid also had a painful experience with his wife, Vashti. Married and living together on a farm as slaves, she gets chosen by the master’s young son to regularly spend the night with him over a long period of time. Stamp Paid explains to Paul D: “I never touched

her all that time. Not once. Almost a year (...). I should have killed him. She said no, but I should have (...) Vashti and me was in the fields together in the day and every now and then she be gone all night” (274). Stamp explains that he got it in his head that had to talk to the young (“seventeen, twenty maybe”, 274) master’s wife in order to make it stop, and he goes near her one day and asks for Vashti. The Mistress doesn’t know Vashti’s name, but when Stamp mentions the black ribbon Vashti wore “every time she went to him” (225), the Master’s wife “got rosy then and I knowed she knowed” (275). His plan didn’t initially work as Vashti still left at night for a while longer, until one morning she said, “I’m back, Josh” (275). Stamp’s reaction is agonizing: “I looked at the back of her neck. She had a real small neck. I decided to break it. You know, like a twig – just snap it. I been low but that was as low as I ever got” (275). His reaction is, according to Peterson, “a long suppressed reaction to his feelings of disempowerment and betrayal” (67), and, as mentioned by Parker Rhodes above, having chosen self-survival this creates guilt rendering an impotent feeling. But unlike Parker Rhodes’ claim that “black men can never correct the guilt” (89), Joshua, rather than hurting his wife, or himself, renames himself Stamp Paid, figuring the gift of his wife to the young master rendered him debt free:

He thought it would make him rambunctious, renegade – a drunkard even, the debtlessness (...). But there was nothing to do with it (...). So he extended his debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak. ‘You paid it; now life owes you’ (218).

Helping other runaways through the Underground Railroad, Stamp Paid becomes an important part of society, “[forging] a black community where people look out for one another” (Peterson 68). Although Stamp Paid was emasculated by having to give up his wife to the young white master, he works through it and uses his built up anger and frustration as a beneficial factor for the whole community. He re-invents himself, as we often see in the orphan trope, becoming a strong and important figure in the free, black community. Peterson argues that this portrayal of Stamp Paid shows that:

Black manhood in its positive manifestation is not rigidly patriarchal and authoritarian; rather black manhood embodies both strength and humility, leadership and vulnerability – indeed, these critical contradictions are essential for the fullest and most productive expression of black manhood (70).

Paul D stands somewhat in contrast to Stamp Paid. Having spent the last 18 years either on the run or on the move, he has decided to lock everything up “in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (86). It is schoolteacher

who teaches Paul D that he is in fact not a man, as he was under Mr. Garner's rule, but an animal, or even lower. After the failed attempt to escape, he was first "tied like a mule" (266), before schoolteacher places a bit in Paul D's mouth. Walking past the roosters and the hens, there is one rooster in particular, Mister, and Paul D says he "[swears] he smiled" (85). Paul D explains about the "hateful" rooster:

"Mister, he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher (...). Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (86).

Being an orphan, thinking about his "Mother. Father. Didn't remember the one. Never saw the other" (258), he was amazed when "once, in Maryland, he met four families of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years" (258). Although he had never experienced anything like that, "he didn't miss it" (258) as he had his half-brothers, friends, Baby Suggs and a boss who treated them like men.

Through Paul D we encounter other slaves and their experiences as observed through him. When Beloved first arrives, he doesn't ask her all the questions he wants, as "a young coloredwoman drifting was drifting from ruin. He had (...) seen five women arriving with fourteen female children. All their men – brothers, uncles, fathers, husbands, sons – had been picked off one by one" (63). He further observes that although "the War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it (...). Forbidden public transportation, chased by debt and filthy 'talking sheets', they followed secondary routes, scanned the horizon for signs and counted heavily on each other" (63). Thinking about all the colored people he had encountered over the past twenty years, as well as his own experiences, he remembers seeing, both before and after the War:

Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who, like him, stole from pigs; who, like him, slept in trees in the day and walked by night; who, like him, had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, patrollers, veterans, hill me, posses and merry-makers. Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies. Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on (78).

Paul D was also sold of to Alfred, Georgia, where he was part of a chain gang of forty-six men who had their sleeping quarters in boxes that had been fitted into a trench "five feet deep,

five feet wide” (125). The men were woken each morning to rifle shots, before they had to stand in line outside their boxes and fasten the leg iron.

Chain-up completed, they knelt down (...). Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none – or all.

“Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry, nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here you go.”

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus (127).

Being sexually abused, the men suffer an even greater sense of emasculation and further traumatization. Nancy Peterson argues that “through their sexual abuse, they are forced into a feminine position of being vulnerable, victimized, and raped. And because this sexual violation is male on male, they are forced into a state of abjection, viewing their own sexual position as that of the ‘faggot’” (74-75). Carol E. Henderson further observes: “For the men on the chain gang, community is formed in the moment of crisis. Through nonverbal communication, these men are able to create an alternative system of speech (...) reclaiming their body as voice” (106-107). Paul D remembers that “not one spoke to the other. At least not with words. The eyes had to tell what there was to tell” (126). Every day the slaves “sang it out and beat it up” (128). Paul D beat Life, “[he] beat her butt all day every day till there was not a whimper in her” (129). After 86 days it starts raining and it won’t stop. The slaves get locked in their boxes, which start overflowing after a few days. Communicating only through pulling the chain, the slaves manage a miraculous escape: “He never figured out how he knew – how anybody did – but he did know – he did – and he took both hands and yanked the length of chain” (130).

Paul D follows flowering trees North with the help of Native Americans. He “worked both sides of the War” after his escape from Georgia, escaping both regiments. After “five tries he had not had one permanent success” (316) in getting away with running away, as

alone, undisguised, with visible skin, memorable hair and no whiteman to protect him, he never stayed uncaught” (316). Having covered a lot of land in between his escapes, “he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breasts, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it (...). Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it (316).

Finally arriving in New Jersey, no one cares about the color of his skin and he even gets offered a job with money. “That was when he decided that to eat, walk and sleep anywhere

was life as good as it got” (318). Paul D finally finds his freedom, but having everything locked up inside he roams around until he finally settles on 124 Bluestone Road.

3.5 Sweet Home – a sweet home?

Sweet Home comes off as a relatively mild environment for the slaves, at least under Mr. Garner’s rule. He treats his slaves like men rather than boys, and both Baby Suggs and Sethe are treated kindly by Mrs. Garner. Baby Suggs observes:

The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted to know. And he didn’t stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to “lay down with her”, like they did in Carolina, or rented out their sex on other farms. It surprised and pleased her, but worried her too” (165).

With the arrival of schoolteacher after Mr. Garner dies, things change and become more like the standard on other farms and plantations. Just like in *A Mercy* where Jacob Vaark was the peg that held the women on the farm together, Paul D realizes that “everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain’t that slavery or what is it?” (259). With the parallel between Mr. Garner and Jacob Vaark, we also see a clear parallel between Mrs. Garner and Rebekka Vaark. “Mrs. Garner, crying like a baby, had sold [Paul D’s] brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed” (11), indicating that she realized that the “family” on the Sweet Home farm was indeed a fake family, and that “an appropriately infertile Mrs. Garner can’t protect her substitute children” (Rhodes 86). The moment her husband dies an untimely death she sells Paul F proving that “all the slaves are products” (Rhodes, 86). Similarly, Rebekka decides to get rid of her slaves shortly after Jacob dies. Both of the white women are above their slaves in status, but they are still subordinate to men in the highly patriarchal societies of their times.

Jewell Parker Rhodes argues that Mr. Garner “does not need to be an abolitionist, for in his mind, his slaves are men and this notion is illogically equated with freedom” (80). This is illustrated in the novel when Mr. Garner brings Baby Suggs to the Bodwins and to her freedom. Miss Bodwin states that “we don’t hold with slavery, even Garner’s kind” to which Garner replies, “tell em, Jenny. You live any better place before mine? (...) Ever go hungry? Cold? Anybody lay a hand on you? Did I let Halle buy you out or not?” (171-172). Rhodes claims that “apparent benevolence in this slave history breeds loyalty in the best sense and passivity in the worst sense” (80), further questioning why the Sweet Home slaves did not think of escaping until schoolteacher took over: “Why would so many black men in the

natural course of slavery, care so much about upholding a white man's reputation which arises from that same white man's control over their souls and bodies?" (83). Rhodes argues that the Sweet Home men are "lulled into thinking they are men with 'free will'" and they in turn "lull Sethe into thinking she is a woman with 'free will'" (83), and that they are collectively "lulled into an acceptance of slavery – they have some dignity, but do not seek to exert free choice regarding their destinies" (85). Rhodes also claims that as the slaves do not share their knowledge about the slaves state, "this illustrates the vulnerability of a collective community when it becomes wedded to images of bliss instead of using rememory of actual slave histories within and without the community" (85). Although the novel shows us the importance of remembering the past, it also shows us that being a slave was a highly traumatic ordeal and that forgetting is one way of coping with the trauma. As the slaves have suffered insidious trauma through generations and the fact that they are aware of what is "out there", I partly disagree with Rhodes' portrayal of the slaves as being lulled into a state of ignorance about slavery. It may be a factor, but I think it is important to take into account the fact that black slaves had been mistreated in the worst sense for over 200 years, and generally had no basic human rights. At Sweet Home the men in particular had a certain freedom. Paul D remembers Sweet Home quite fondly nearly 20 years after he escaped:

He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns(...). Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? Who gave them the privilege not of working but deciding how to? No. In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to" (147).

Rhodes argues that the relationship between the slaves at Sweet Home and Garner was in fact like true metal, "unbending in the fact that Garner never offers manumission papers" (81) and that Paul D never faults Garner and "even in memory, fails to recognize his [own] individual right to a better, more encompassing, free life" (81). I believe that it was hard for the slaves to imagine a free life having lived with insidious trauma of generations past their whole life. Even Baby Suggs does not realize what freedom actually is until her feet touches free ground, and Sethe remarks that "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (111-112). Knowing what Paul D went through from the moment schoolteacher took over Sweet Home and for years after when he was either on a chain gang or on the run, it

isn't all that hard to understand why he has elevated thoughts of Mr. Garner and the utopia he created for his slaves at Sweet Home.

Sethe has not idealized Sweet Home as much as Paul D has. Feeling blessed that she had six years of marriage to Halle and having him father every one of her children, she remembers it as

A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one. As though a handful of myrtle stuck in the handle of a pressing iron propped against the door in a whitewoman's kitchen could make it hers. As though mint sprig in the mouth changed the breath as well as its odor. A bigger fool never lived (28).

There could be several reasons for Sethe not remembering Sweet Home in the same nostalgic manner as Paul D. For one, she had her most singular traumatic experience at the farm with the white boys stealing her milk and schoolteacher splitting her back open. After her escape into freedom she had 28 wonderful days before the return of schoolteacher and the infanticide. Sethe also remembers some of her past before Sweet Home and a little bit of her mother, keeping her ancestral ties slightly more open than Paul D's, even though they both try to keep the past in the past. Sethe did not seem to have the same "freedom" as the men either, being confined to the house and the kitchen doing chores along with Mrs. Garner.

Rhodes argues that "the slave community is good and necessary for survival, but it is a substitute rather than a healthy addition to family life" (84). The slave community at Sweet Home could itself have been reason enough to keep the slaves from running. The community might well be a form of substitute for a family life, but as the slaves were usually unable to create their own families, I would argue that it is in fact a healthy addition. Diana Pazicky uses Frederick Douglass as an example and explains that "deprived of natural bonds and a sense of personal history, he is denied the fundamental human experience that shapes identity. As a result, he struggles to compensate by bonding with other slaves" (182). Douglass himself "implies a connection between submission to slavery and attachment to one's friends" (182) and Pazicky quotes Douglass:

It is my opinion that thousands would escape from slavery, who now remain, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends. The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else (182).

It is perhaps not so strange that the slaves at Sweet Home never thought about escaping until schoolteacher took over. Orphaned, with little or no ties to their ancestral history, not exposed

to singular traumatic experiences but still aware of the historical trauma of slavery, they formed a communal family on the farm with Mr. Garner as a sort of father figure.

3.6 The African American community

Seeing the importance of the community, one might wonder why Sethe and Baby Suggs were left out of society after the infanticide, especially with Baby Suggs having been such an important part of it. The day before the infanticide, Stamp Paid picks blackberries and brings them to Baby Suggs, Sethe and her children. He puts one in Denver's mouth and the look of the baby's "thrilled eyes and smacking lips" (160) made Baby Suggs decide "to do something with the fruit worthy of the man's labor and his love" (160). She decides to invite a few others and

from Denver's two thrilled eyes it grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 shook with voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry (...). Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys (...). 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone (...) Loaves and fishes were His powers – they did not belong to an ex-slave (161).

The community is violently jealous and Baby Suggs can smell "the scent of their disapproval" (162) in the air. After a while of wondering about the smell she realizes that "her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (163). Baby Suggs realizes there is something else, "dark and coming" (163) behind the scent of the angry community. This dark and coming thing is schoolteacher and his companions coming to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home. Years later, when Stamp Paid tells Paul D about what happened, he tries to explain why no one warned Baby Suggs or Sethe that white people were looking for them:

Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing – like, well, a meanness – that let them stand aside, or pay no attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house on Bluestone Road where a pretty lady had been living for almost a month. (...) Maybe they just wanted to know if Baby really was special, blessed in some way they were not (185).

The community turns on Baby Suggs and her kin, and Sethe murdering her own child does not diminish the resentful feelings that had arisen. When Sethe comes out of the house after

the schoolteacher has left, the people who had gathered outside 124 saw “a profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once” (179), and they transfer the jealous feeling and their pride onto Sethe, seeing her in their own image. Nancy Peterson states that “Morrison’s novels are careful not to romanticize black community” (33), further assuming that one reason for this could be that they are still “traumatized in the aftermath of slavery: in other words, not healed enough to the point to be able to care unconditionally for a fellow ex-slave” (33-34). Having suffered trauma for generations it is likely that the slaves have “[internalized] feelings of inferiority and self-contempt, which are projected onto them by the patriarchal Western discourse” (López Ramírez 76) The negative feelings the community felt for Baby Suggs and Sethe could be feelings they have themselves been exposed to for most of their lives, now projected onto members of their own community.

The community does step up for Sethe and Denver when they find out that Beloved is back and tormenting Sethe. With Denver talking to more and more women in the communal society, they reminisce over 124 being a “way station, the place they assembled” (293) and fond memories of Baby Suggs. It is Ella who finally gathers the women of the community, because “whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present”(302). By remembering the past and deciding not to let it take hold of the present or future, the women drive out Beloved, embrace Denver and hold no grudge towards Sethe anymore. Whereas Beloved represents an unchangeable past, Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and the community at large, “illustrate possibilities of the present and future, as they evolve from slaves into free men and women” (Bloom 46). It is through the character’s rememory that the healing process can begin for the African Americans coping with insidious and singular traumas.

4 Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the themes orphanhood and trauma and how they are connected in the novels *A Mercy* and *Beloved*. Trauma has been divided into singular traumatic events and insidious trauma, and we have seen how there is a clear need for the definition of insidious trauma in accordance with Laura Brown's theory. The characters in both novels represent the people who usually suffer insidious trauma – the marginalized people who do not adhere to a white, male standard. In *A Mercy* the racial divide has not yet been fully formed, so it is particularly the women who are subjected to traumatic events in the highly patriarchal society. We further see that the Europeans who fled to the New World in order to escape persecution, internalized their oppressors' values and became oppressors themselves. Feeling left out of the "family" of their native countries, Europeans feared becoming orphans, and projected their fears onto the non-dominant groups, making marginalized peoples scapegoats and thus orphans. We have seen that although all the women in *A Mercy* were oppressed, the European Rebekka, having suffered insidious trauma her whole life before arriving in America, becomes an oppressor herself as soon as she is no longer under the rule of a man.

In *Beloved* the racial divide is complete and slavery has become coupled with being black. Although we encounter a white indentured servant, Amy Denver, it is clear that she is above the black slave, Sethe. African Americans have become culturally and literally orphaned by this time as they have suffered insidious trauma in America for the past 200 years. Both men and women are sold, traded, beaten, hanged, sexually abused and cut off from any familial ties. Without family, the community serves as an important substitute where slaves or former slaves can come together to share a collective past in order to heal.

In both novels, the orphan trope leaves the characters with a possibility to re-create themselves. Rememory of ones past helps to serve as a coping strategy and a chance to move forward. Morrison stresses that a connection to the past allows for both individuals and the community to heal from the wounds of the insidious traumas inflicted on the ancestors in the past. As long as individuals and communities comply with the oppressive definition of the mainstream culture, individual and community identity cannot be obtained. A collective memory of the ancestral past was vital for the slaves to cope with trauma and to move forward. Through her novels, Morrison brings her readers out of the national amnesia that was slavery.

A Mercy and *Beloved* are Toni Morrison's two novels that are set the furthest back in time. Further study of her novels set in a more current time could be conducted to see how or if the themes of orphanhood and trauma continue to affect African American individuals and community.

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