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Courtney Murray March 29, 2018

# “The Morrison Quest”: Disturbing the Complacency of the Classical Literary Imagination and Creating Home through Black Experience

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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This thesis explores the intersections between classical literature and Toni Morrison's novels: *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, and *God Help the Child*. The commonality—the quest exists in both—but their differences demonstrate Morrison's revision of the classical mythological quest, thus, the name, "The Morrison Quest." The Morrison Quest champions experience and the power of femininity over biased, disconnected, emotional gods and goddesses. She replaces the multiple deities seen in classical mythology with one main experiential figure or elder who oversees a network of ancestral female figures placed permanently in the African American community. Their one main priority is re-establishing the stability of individual and communal bonds. Her women have the strength to unite whole communities, guide and send messages even in the afterlife, and look past racial and gender constrictions to create their own communities. This thesis argues that Morrison creates a myth-experience not only for her characters but for her readers, so that we all can attempt to understand that the quest is a universal human experience where home becomes a fluid, spiritual, and imagined connector between all of us.

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Table of Contents

**Introduction**

This thesis is a result of my interests in classical studies and Toni Morrison. Both areas share one main commonality—the quest. Because of prior interests, I wondered whether Morrison conformed to or complicated the idea of quest seen in classical mythology in her work, so my research question(s) became: How does the quest in Morrison's work compare to the quest seen in classical mythology? What is significant about those similarities and differences and how do they change the purpose of the quest in her work? Both types of quest involve an isolated hero who has to eventually reintegrate back into his or her community. During their quests, heroes from both are in the company of spiritual and physical helpers. Once they do return to their communities, they have obtained a new understanding of the world and humanity. Morrison's quest differs by championing experience and the power of femininity over chaos, male-centered quests, and biased, disconnected, emotional gods and goddesses. She replaces the multiple deities seen in classical mythology with one main experiential figure or elder who oversees a network of ancestral female figures placed permanently in African American communities. Their one main priority is re-establishing the stability of individual and communal bonds. In essence, these differences demonstrate Morrison revising the classical mythological quest, and it is why I call it "The Morrison Quest." This thesis argues that she creates a myth-experience not only for her characters but for her readers, so that we all can attempt to understand that the quest is a universal human experience where home becomes a fluid, spiritual, and imagined connector between all of us.

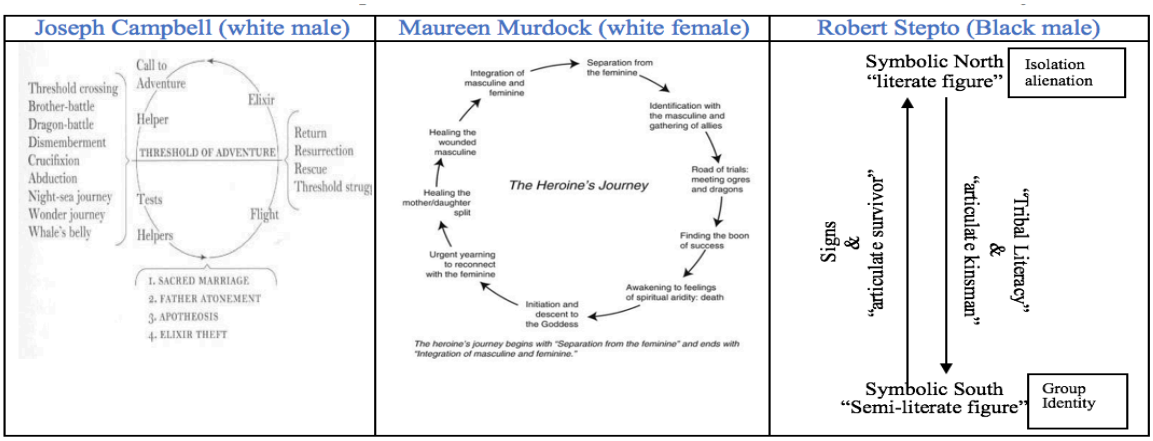
My methodology mostly engages textual analysis through four of Morrison's novels. In saying that, the four texts—*Beloved*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, and *God Help the Child*—are analyzed as parallel occurrences all connected by the fluid figure of The Quest Experience. They represent not only the development of The Quest Experience from the start of the slave trade to more

modern times but also the transformation of the African American community. Through chapter two and chapter three, I demonstrate how The Morrison Quest creates a phenomenological and ontological experience for her questing figures. The Quest Experience purposefully manipulates her questing figures' experiences to deconstruct and reconstruct their sense of being created by white (patriarchal) supremacy. I trace The African American Quest Experience through each of the four novels and through the novels' shared elements that each questing figure encounters. I do this not only to demonstrate the fluidity of the experience between the characters and the novels but also to mark the presence of The Quest Experience and her influence. For example, chapter two, which discusses the spiritual dimension, reveals that each novel has at least one ancestral figure connected to The Quest Experience. Through spiritual and physical manifestations of both groups, they both work together to help the questing figure progress towards their selfhood and ultimately communal reintegration. In the third chapter, which focuses on the physical dimension, The Quest Experience makes her presence known through nature, and the questing figures encounter both spaces of deconstruction and reconstruction that attempt to teach them how to tear down their detrimental, old sense of self and community. Two consistent elements that span both the physical and spiritual dimensions are figurative/literal quilts and Baby Suggs' Clearing. Both represent the need for unity individually and communally while encouraging us to respect, acknowledge, and understand the importance of each of our quests.

**Chapter 1: Previous Handlings of the Quest and 'The Morrison Quest'**

This chapter creates a dialogue to investigate how others from different disciplines, genders, and backgrounds view the quest. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, quest has two noun definitions and two verb definitions. The former, having definitions from 1300 and 1325 respectively, meant "a will, a testament; a bequest, a legacy," "an inquest, inquiry, investigation," "a search, pursuit," and "in chivalric or Arthurian romance: an expedition or search undertaken by a knight. . .Now also: a similar search or journey in any fictional narrative." Interestingly, the verb forms each have at least one unique meaning. From the year 1350, it meant "to request or demand (something)"; however, in 1647, it meant "to crush (a thing)". Combining all these definitions, the transformation of the word throughout history parallels the development of quest within literary quest narratives. The earlier noun definitions demonstrate that a quest is simultaneously defined by the quester's external and internal motivation and how quests are an inherited experience. The later noun definitions incorporate the idea that the quest involves questioning of and searching for something. But it also represents that the quest is socially constructed and associated with maleness, and literature has become a medium through which these ideals are expressed. The verb forms show aspects of the quest that many may not notice—a conversational aspect. The beginning of a quest can be a kind of demand, request, or yearning for several things like a better future or existence. Once the questers resolve that demand or desire, they notice that they had to crush, transform, or recreate a part of themselves to obtain the prize. The definitions of quest are complex and dynamic, but many have attempted to transform it into a universal and generalized science. As a result, they create overgeneralized and simplified methodologies, boundaries, and binaries within the quest

narrative.

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Three examples of quest methodologies that illuminate the inner workings of societal stereotypes and separations in quest narratives are Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*, and Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Ismael Reed writes in his novel, *Flight to Canada*, "Book titles tell the story"[2]. Foregrounding the titles, one can delve deeper into each author's understanding of the quest and who they understand to be the quester. At first glance, Campbell's title appears neutral and communal, but the definitions of the key word, "hero," have some derivative of the phrase "a man (or occasionally a woman)" to define the quester. Hero establishes masculine undertones within the quest—making his quest explanation male-centered. First, the quester has to be male; then, the thousand faces follow. On the other hand, the key word in Murdock's title is "journey". Its definitions include some derivative of the phrase "a day's travel". In contrast to Campbell's multitudinous quest definition, journey seems secondary or normal, while also contradicting with her subtitle, "Woman's Quest for Wholeness". It creates

[1] Picture 1 is taken from Campbell's book. Picture 2 is taken from Maureen Murdock's website at maureenmurdock.com. I created the last picture based on Stepto's description on page 167.
[2] Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. Simon & Shuster, 1998.

a hierarchical structure that demotes the female's quest in its entirety but promotes its ability to create a whole woman. Of course, the latter is very important, but it is also very crucial that society views the female quest as an equal to the male quest. Stepto's title uses a quotation from W.E.B Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* to define the "veil" in his title. In the quotation, Du Bois declares he dwells above the veil when he interacts with well-respected playwrights and philosophers. If the veil not only represents the divide between Black and white but also represents the double-sightedness of the Black community, the veil also connects to literacy. Stepto affirms this when he says:

> The first is that Afro-American culture, like all cultures, has its store of what Northrop Frye has called "canonical stories" or what I call "pregeneric myths"—shared stories or myths that not only exist prior to literary form, but eventually shape the forms that comprise a given culture's literary canon. The primary pregeneric myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy. (Stepto ix)

Juxtaposing his quotation to his title, numerous nuances are revealed about African-American literature. Stepto encloses the African American narrative in a certain aura of superiority by using 'canonical,' which means "of the nature of a canon or rule; of admitted authority, excellence, or supremacy" (*OED*). By unveiling the African-American literary form, he argues why it should also be considered and accepted as rule along with others who are considered "canonical". Another interpretation is that Stepto wants to offer a peek or glimpse from behind the veil to his non-black readership. Most likely to show them that their literature parallels African American literature and both could be used as a medium of freedom and literacy. Either interpretation asserts that African-American literature is more complex than recognized. Unlike the two other titles, Stepto's title does not include the words "quest," "hero," or "heroine". By

using the word quest on the first page and the consistent use of the word "hero-narrator" starting on page 35, Stepto may equate the "Afro-American narrative" with the hero's quest. Instead of including works from both Black women and Black men within the narrative form, he attempts to hide his male-heavy focus with a vague title similar to Campbell. Overall, these authors' titles and language link their identities and how they associate with quest, which will be discussed in the upcoming section concerning Campbell's, Murdock's, and Stepto's visions of the quest.

Each model features some aspect of the authors' identities, which contributes to their biased view of the quest. The first two, Campbell and Murdock, will first be compared due to their similarities, while using Deborah E. McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" to critique Stepto's linear version of the quest narrative. Murdock was shocked when Campbell said:

> In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she's not going to get messed up with notion of being pseudo-male. (Murdock 2)

The above comment is a great segue into how Murdock and Campbell understand the start and end of both hero and heroine quests. Murdock explicitly states, "the model of the heroines' journey is derived in part from Campbell's model of the heroic quest, and "[the heroines' journey] is the quest to fully embrace their feminine nature, learning how to value themselves as women and to heal the deep wound of the feminine" (Murdock 3). Before delving into the stages of Murdock's and Campbell's quests, there is a contradiction between Murdock's methodology and what she believes represents the quest. A heroine's journey cannot derive from such a patriarchal structure as Campbell's quest. It reinforces that women should find themselves in the

pre-ordered steps defined by men. Beginning with their first steps, Campbell considers it a "Call to Adventure" while Murdock believes it to be a "Separation from the Feminine". In contrast to Campbell's hero, Murdock's beginning depicts society disconnecting a female from her femininity. Campbell says that his "hero can go forth of his own volition to accomplish the adventure…or he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent" (Campbell 53). What differs between Campbell and Murdock is that there is choice; Campbell offers his hero the option of choosing whether he is forced to accept the call and time where the hero can refuse the call. On the other hand, Murdock's heroines are encouraged to discover a problem with their femininity and their mothers. Women fight their femininity to achieve some sort of inner masculinity, which positions women where they yearn for toxic maleness instead of developing their own selfhood.

The end of both Campbell's and Murdock's quests share the idea of a sacred marriage and return/resurrection. In the former (Campbell), the sacred marriage can be interpreted as a "sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world" (Campbell 228), but it could also be interpreted as the hero's ability to master and join "the divine and the human" (Campbell 201). Murdock's sacred marriage portrays a union between her opposites—her inner masculine and lost femininity—to gain a complete self (Murdock 160). With their two versions in such close proximity, both quests show a different purpose. Both birth a new understanding into the world, but their proportions are unequal. Campbell's hero gains sexual domination over the feminine while Murdock's heroine gains balance. Balance between male and female are important to repair the brokenness of society; instead of a balance between the heroine's inner femininity and inner masculine, her quest should be to discover self-empowerment and to use it as a tool to teach males about balance and to mend the divide between the two groups.

Stepto provides a more linear interpretation of the quest in the African-American tradition that attempts to add depth to African American literature. His theory also suffers due to his patriarchal outlook. Stepto's quest is not always an actual quest to the north or south but to places and spaces that share characteristics with those areas. Stepto considers these types of narratives/quests as narratives of ascent and immersion. The former consists of a "semi-literate figure" who has to trade communal connection for isolation/solitude. His main deed is to become literate in the "systems of signs" that he "must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free," which transforms him into an "articulate survivor" (Stepto 167). The latter consists of the questing-figure's return to the oppressive south where he becomes an "articulate kinsman". He returns for a sense of community and "tribal literacy" (Stepto 167). This, ultimately, leads to the questing-figure increasing the literacy and freedom of his community through his gained knowledge in the north.

> Black women writers are conspicuously absent from the table of contents. Though Stepto does have a token two-page discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which he refers to it as a "seminal narrative in Afro-American letters," he did not feel that the novel merited its own chapter or the thorough analysis accorded the other works he discusses. (McDowell 153)

Even when he does give Hurston's novel an honorable mention, half of the "two-page discussion" comprises of a critique of the novel. Stepto claims that Hurston's novel contains "one major flaw" in narration because Hurston decides to narrate Janie's story through "an omniscient third person, rather than by a first-person narrator," which "implies that Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (Stepto 166). In reality, Stepto's understanding of the African-American narrative tradition contains one major flaw. Despite his reasoning or his

masculinity, he failed at understanding that the African-American narrative is not completely defined by men; it is practiced by all in the community. He believes Hurston had a difficult time giving Janie her own voice; I believe otherwise. I can only speculate that Hurston's use of the African-American narrative was proof, a creation, and/or an assertion of her own voice; a medium to assert her right to create a character such as Janie. Janie simultaneously receives her voice as Hurston uses hers to create Janie and her other work.

Regarding more contemporary, Kathleen Noble's "The Female Hero: A Quest for Healing and Wholeness" combines the psychological with the mythical to promote the importance of the female quest. Unlike Murdock, Noble understands the importance of the word quest, but her title also highlights the relationship between female questers and male power. First, there is the hero then there is the female. Withstanding her willingness to align her structure with Campbell's structure, Noble's argument teases out what could happen in the future for the betterment of women. She writes:

> I am convinced women need a mythology which empowers us to claim, not suppress, our femininity, to perceive ourselves as the heroes of our own lives and the authors of our own stories, and to apprehend our life journeys as heroic quests. I am convinced we need a mythology which tells us, as Heilbrun (1988) suggests, "to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular." (Noble 4-5)

Noble offers a possible solution from the beginning—women creating a new world or society for future women. Women taking the forefront and asserting their heroine-ness and their quests' place in the mythical realm, which means declaring that their quests, alongside male quests, have the ability to "teach us about the depths and farthest reaches of our being" (Noble 5). But there are moments that Noble's argument opposes her female empowerment overtone.

Noble clearly "[believes] [the female quester] must not become a clone of the male hero (8)," but she is quite blind to the material surrounding her during the 1990s. She includes two troubling statements in her argument:

> I have been paying more attention recently to much of the popular psychological literature being written by and for women, and I am disturbed that so many books describe women as loving too much, making foolish choices, or exhibiting a variety of self-destructive complexes…I believe women cast themselves too often in the role of "tragic heroine…" (Noble 4)
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>
> Our literature about heroic women is impoverished, at best, and consequently many women grow up believing that should they strive for adventure, they have no alternative but to model themselves after men. (Noble 5).

These two statements raise questions about Noble's audience, purpose, and the depth of her understanding of diverse genres or versions of the female quest. Noble's essay appears in the ninth volume of *Women & Therapy*, which was published in 1990. Prior to that year and afterward, many women authors including Morrison and Alice Walker had already published several novels and won several awards; Morrison was well on her way to receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Both authors were creating female characters that are true exemplars of female heroines. Noble errs by modeling the quest closely after Campbell's sense of quest. On the one hand, Noble could have purposely used Campbell's model because there is no mention of a split, separation, or a wound in the hero's quest. It is only a quest for individual rebirth and to obtain the boon that "restores the world" (Campbell 228). She does not paint women as wounded and psychologically caught between masculine and feminine forces, which contrasts with the Murdock model. On the other hand, her use of his model shows another woman scholar relying

heavily on male-centered interpretations. Instead of creating something new, she continues to fit the complex situation of women in a model not made for them; it suggests that women must find a new understanding of their own quest/experience within the boundaries of a male model.

Noble overgeneralizes the female quest by making such broad statements. Without considering ALL types of female quest, she asserts assumptions for the entire population of women. Indeed, society marginalizes women; however, women can be disassembled into smaller communities who face differing cultural and racial experiences. Noble had an opportunity to disregard what her white female gaze thought should be the heroine's quest, but she failed by providing a simplistic and idealistic quest where women transcend their past by only telling their stories; but it is more than that. Realistically, a woman must accept and fully participate in all aspects of her quest to truly obtain her freedom; therefore, she not only experiences but also remembers her tragic heroine-ness, while striving to accrue her goddess-ness.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek foregrounds Janie's quest in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Parallel to Noble, she refers to Stepto's and Campbell's idea of narrative and quest, but she furthers it to illustrate a truth about Black women and their quests in the African American community. She expands Stepto's two-page honorable mention into an entire essay. Rather than see Janie's heroine qualities, other scholar would rather imagine Janie as the prize of the quest rather than the heroine. Kubitschek uses this framework and Janie's experience with the quest to illuminate her as the ultimate leader in "Afro-American literature"—the storyteller[3]. Janie brings her individual quest home to motivate the community to take on its own quest. Kubitschek's interpretation combines factors such as nature, quest, and relationships to show:

[3] It is important to also note that Stepto says, "Through the frame Hurston creates the essential illusion that Janie has achieved her voice (along with everything else), and that she has even wrested from menfolk some control of the tribal posture of the storyteller" (Stepto 167). Even though Kubitschek seems to appreciate Stepto's recognition of Janie, he, along with others, seems quite doubtful of Janie's legitimacy.

> Through Janie, Hurston merges the quest pattern with the Afro-American call-and-response to form a new experience, a group quest or ascent. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* intimates an Eatonville with Janie and a whole group of Pheobys growing "ten feet tall," traveling in company "tuh de horizon and back," ever constructing and renewing both individual and community. (Kubitschek 114)

Even though Kubitschek also creates Janie's quest within Campbell's and Stepto's models, her interpretation connects to what Morrison also does in her novels. Hurston giving voice and agency to Janie, which ultimately gives voice and agency to the Black community, is a powerful statement. It is powerful because it resists men like Stepto who realize the power of Black women and authors but only give that power a certain amount of space among their male counterparts. It is a powerful statement because it resists those who try to demote Janie's quest by viewing her as the prize rather than the quester; the one whose only desire "is to love, to be loved, and to share the life of her man" (Kubitschek 109). Kubitschek and Hurston encourage women to promote female agency and freedom through their lives and writing for the sake of future generations.

Examples from classical literature can combat male-dominated scholarship on the quest narrative. External from the texts and characters, male authors and poets used their texts as avenues to speculate upon the female body and its agency. This section contains three examples: Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" story from *The Golden Ass*. The task is to place their female characters to the forefront[4]. Despite their invisibility, their lack of voice, or the lack of recognition of their own quests, the women in these myths are just as important as the men.

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[4] Bringing them to the forefront not only means putting their existence into the light but also interpreting those already in the light in a more positive manner.

Ovid and Homer give their narrators strong authority over how the reader should perceive the female's quests. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the narrative is mostly preoccupied with Odysseus's—a man and a name that epitomizes quest—struggle to return home, while his wife Penelope weaves and unravels her father-in-law's shroud and waits for her husband's and son's return. In contrast, Ovid's collection surprisingly contains several women receiving their own space and stories amidst the male quests. But most of these stories contain women who are maddened by love, created in some fashion by men, and/or punished through natural transformation. The women characters are Penelope from the *Odyssey* and Scylla who appears in both texts. Basic interpretation paint Penelope as the epitome of goodness, while the Scylla figure embodies badness. With her name meaning both "faithful wife" and "needlework,"[5] Penelope "gives prominence to the figure of the wife" and demonstrates a quest that does not require "physical strength and courage" (Murnaghan xl). Homer's Scylla is a monster who devours most of Odysseus' men, and Ovid's Scylla is a young girl who betrays her father and kingdom for love. Her lover rebukes her and out of desperation she follows him. Then, she transforms into a bird while being torn at by her father in sea-eagle form. The Scylla figure in both texts seem to be "manifestations of a fear of female envelopment" and "the narrowness and rigidity of the Greek ideal of femininity, precariously positioned between the twin dangers of excessively aggressive and defensive female sexuality" (Hopman 10).

While these first interpretations reaffirm the good/bad binary of women, good and bad simplify the women's agency. Penelope's weaving is first a fight to keep her womanly virtues and protect her marriage. But the weaving is a deeper symbol than a use of protection. Coincidentally, Penelope is unmotivated to finish the shroud until Odysseus is close to home.

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[5] Definitions come from *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The weaving and unraveling of the shroud correspond with the survival of Odysseus on his voyage. If she would have finished too early or too late, would Odysseus have ever made it home? As long as she weaved, he continued his journey. Her weaving and unraveling her work, similar to the ebb and flow of the tides, could have been a spiritual lifeline/connector that not only kept her kingdom safe but ensured Odysseus' homecoming[6]. Patricia Salzman-Mitchell in her book, *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, also interprets weaving as something deeper:

> Thus, we propose that when women weave recognizable images and not just decorative patterns, they are able to communicate their own gazes and ideas in textiles. By doing this, they adopt a transgressive stance and appropriate prerogatives not normally allowed to them: they acquire a voice and gaze. (Salzman-Mitchell 121).

In relation to Penelope, her domestic activities become mediums of power. Women who participate in domestic activities in classical literature have the ability to write and communicate their version of the story or quest. They direct their stories' action. Yes, Penelope weaved to keep her suitors at bay, but without her cleverness, would there have been a story to tell?

The Scylla figure's name stem from the word tearing[7]. Scylla, a six-headed monster, eats several of Odysseus' men, while Ovid's Scylla tears/cuts the powerful, purple lock from her father's head to give to her lover. But their tearing could also be their attempt to assert their own freedom. Both are confined—the former a rocky cavern and the latter a lonely tower. The Scylla monster uses her tearing as a way to declare her femininity over masculinity. She is one of the main figures that hampers Odysseus' ability to protect his ship and his men. Ovid's Scylla, on

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[6] For more analysis of this relationship I recommend reading Steven Lowenstam's "The Shroud of Laertes and Penelope's Guile".

[7] Also, a reference to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

the other hand, claims her agency by resisting her confinement for her true love—freedom. Her desperateness could be interpreted as uncontrolled desire for her lover, but throughout her story, there is anger towards her father and a desire for flight. Even after Minos, her lover, refuses to take her father's purple hair, scolds her, and attempts to leave her, she struggles to follow him by clinging to his ship. Scylla, imprisoned by her father, sees her father as a symbol of constriction and Minos as a symbol of possible freedom and travel. In the end, her transformation into a bird is a response to her unfulfilled desire. She receives the opportunity to be free from the need of men.

Additionally, Psyche, an abandoned woman with a mysterious husband, goes on a quest similar to any hero's quest. Many like E.J. Kenney believe the following:

> In the first place, her invariable reaction on being confronted with each successive trial is despair, and in each case, it is only the power of Cupid that sees her through. . .Her rescue by Cupid is occasioned by his desire to be reunited with her. She cannot therefore really be said to have deserved her salvation, except in so far as she never ceases to yearn for Love. (Kenney 14)

Kenney's statement claims Psyche is unable to endure her own quest without the secret help of Cupid. Without his desire to be with her, she would continue wandering in the wilderness and ultimately be defeated by Venus' tasks. One could argue that Psyche's willingness to be tested by Venus was due to her undying love, but what if her quest was a journey for herself? What is so important to her that she gains the courage to come face to face with death itself? In the end, the gods and Venus celebrate Cupid's and Psyche's marriage, and Psyche receives the gift of immortality. The marriage results in the birth of Pleasure. Psyche cleverly and strategically rises above the pain of being disowned and discovers a home where there will never be death, while

also being a quest for self-love and agency. The only true character is Psyche; the others are positive and negative versions of herself. Venus is the more dominant, negative persona that may form in women, while Psyche is the submissive persona. There are two versions of Cupid: the first being the overcompensating, blind version of love, and the second being self-love. The former is what Psyche has to eliminate in her marriage to self-love to become her true and supreme self.

## The Morrison Quest

The purpose of defining quest, providing examples of scholarship and literary opinions, and moving women to the forefront in the stories confirm not only how men subtlety dominate quest narratives but also to show how Morrison attempts to combat that domination. In most of her novels, even those that focus on males, her women have the space to go on their own physical, emotional, and internal quests alongside their male counterparts. Furthermore, her women's quests always have the potential to teach valuable lessons to the men around them. The attempt at defining Morrison's use of the quest in her novels as "The Morrison Quest" is to express how her work alongside Black feminist criticism is a "corrective, unmasking the omissions and distortions of the past—the errors of a literary critical tradition that arise from and reflect a culture created, perpetuated, and dominated by men" (McDowell 153). Her novels go farther than liberation; they completely rewrite, give voice, and attempt to fill the gap of not only spaces like the Middle Passage but also Black women history. The Morrison Quest could influence every one of every ethnicity, age, and creed not only to accept the validity of the marginalized questing-figure but also to re-evaluate their own quests.

The Morrison Quest is a myth-experience. Through myth, she creates truths out of fiction, which one must dig deep to understand. One of myth's definitions in the *OED* has the phrase "imaginary person or thing," which is the second trait of Morrison's myth-experience—

the use of the imagination to envision the possibility of the imaginary. She stands alongside others in the African American canon who participate in the concept of mythography. Recreating, creating, and destroying what others have written, said, and forced upon Black people and writing into existence what they have tried to repress and what they wish for comprises mythography. Also, in the *OED*, experience is defined as:

1. The action of putting to the test; trial.
2. A tentative procedure; an operation performed in order to ascertain or illustrate some truth; an experiment.
3. The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event.

The second part of myth-experience is three-tiered; each definition contributing to an exchange between Morrison, character, and reader. For example, Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, is based on the true story of Margaret Garner. Morrison wanted to understand the inner workings of Garner, so *Beloved*, in a way, is a test or an experiment to demonstrate what could have motivated Garner to take her child's life. Additionally, the spirit, Beloved, is an experimentation with different mediums of truth. Morrison uplifts the ghost/spirit figure from its negative connotations to bring truth of inner peace and the value of identity. Lastly, the reader receives an opportunity to be affected by the characters, which may greatly influence their future opinions of freedom, home, and identity. In saying that, The Morrison Quest teaches interconnectedness and universality while also encouraging empowerment through Black women's experiences. Unlike Stepto and Campbell, Morrison makes the Black woman a necessary figure in her work. The Morrison Quest is their space to be the heroine with a thousand faces.

## Chapter 2: "They Grouped, Murmuring and Whispering": The Elder, her Ancestors, and their Guidance through The Morrison Quest

In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison reflects that along with "oral quality, and the participation of the reader and the chorus" in African-American writing:

> There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. ("Rootedness" 61-62)

Her reflection establishes that the essentials of African American writing are voice and community. Without the central figure, the ancestor/the foundation, the writing lacks what supports the community's storytelling, music playing, and communal identity. The key phrases are "there is always an elder there" and "they are sort of timeless people." The former conveys singularity and "superior validity" not only through its definition, but also from its position in Morrison's quotation (*OED*). The conjunction "and" shows an addition to; the plural ancestor joins but follows the singular elder. This use of ancestors is equated with "timeless people," meaning they are a group of people taught an eternal knowledge ("Rootedness" 62). Through this eternal knowledge, they teach their community important lessons. Would it not have been more consistent to use the same appellation for ancestor if they are, in actuality, the same thing? There is a hierarchal power incorporated into Morrison's quotation. First, there must be the elder; then, the ancestors follow. The elder is the source of ancient knowledge and she teaches her ancestors not only the power of community and orality, but the tools for survival—individual and communal. This thesis reverses the known understanding of elders and ancestors based on Morrison's above quotation and Greek mythology. There is one spiritual elder over a network of

spiritually embodied ancestors who are strategically placed in the African American community. Since the stability of the individual and community are priority in Morrison's work, the elder places permanent spirits/ancestors to guide the questing-figures in the place of disconnected gods and goddesses who choose whether or not to go among humans. Further along in her essay, Morrison states "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost…When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" ("Rootedness" 63-64). By losing or disconnecting from the ancestor, one eventually severs the ties that bind them to that ancient knowledge that existed before patriarchy, before racism, and even before humankind. This leads to questions such as: How does this connection/disconnection affect quests in Morrison's literature? Is there one, consistent elder present in her literature and how does that presence unite with her ancestors/agents/disciples to guide those quests? What knowledge do they desire to pass down?

Melanie R. Anderson offers a possible answer in her book *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She claims:

> What if the specter of Beloved is a "type" of character that readers should notice throughout her novels, not just "the beloved" but as a figure of spectrality mediating personal and cultural history? I posit that Morrison connects her novels not only through cultural history but also through a preoccupation with spectrality and the haunting, disjointed natures of both personal and cultural history. (Anderson 1)

From this selection, Anderson blurs what separates the spiritual and physical realm while also emphasizing Beloved's distinction and importance as a connector in Morrison's literature. To Anderson, Beloved is a type of character that appears throughout Morrison's canon. Similar to Morrison in "Rootedness," Anderson's quotation illustrates a difference between the plural "beloved" and the singular "figure of spectrality"; both have their own communal duties, but

they are two parts streaming from one source. Anderson informs her reader that many have theorized on how Beloved physically materializes in other works,[8] but, instead, she focuses on how "Wild is a kind of Beloved," but not the same character. In my reading, she is a specter like Morrison's previous ghost and her fictional comrades" (Anderson 107). Anderson offers an interpretation that places Beloved amongst "the beloved" or "timeless people", which creates a band of ancestral women who share eternal knowledge. Even though Anderson's interpretation is intriguing and convincingly shows a connection throughout Morrison's canon, the interpretation overlooks or fails to investigate the origins of the Beloved type characters. Who taught or gave them the ability to "[serve] as a bridge for the people [they] [haunt], connecting individuals to cultural and personal history and generations to one another" (Anderson 18)? Beloved, one of Morrison's strongest and all-knowing characters, has the power and memory to be the elder guiding her ancestors who then guide their respective communities.

The Morrison Quest originates from one main flow or stream of African American experience heavily influenced by the traditions, communications, and guidance of African American women. This one main stream of consciousness encapsulates itself within the figure of Beloved. She controls the connectivity of The Morrison Quest throughout each of Morrison's novels. There are two parts of Beloved: one being Sethe's unnamed baby girl and the other being "The African American Quest Experience," which will be shortened to "The Quest Experience" or TQE[9]. The former has to go on her own quest for answers while the latter is the catalyst for all

[8] "In particular, Peter Nicholls and Sarah Appleton Aguiar both posit that Wild [character from *Jazz*] is a manifestation of Beloved, showing readers where she migrated after the events of the earlier novel, and Nicholls reads Joe Trace [Wild's son] as the child of Paul D and Beloved, physically continuing that saga in a new generation" (Anderson 107).

[9] Sharon P. Holland states in her essay, "*Bakulu* Discourse: The Language of the Margin in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" that "Beloved speaks on two levels—to the common *individual* experience of life in the womb and to the larger historical *communal* experience of black people in the middle passage" (Holland 97).

quests to teach the message to Be Loved. Coincidentally, TQE herself manifests the strongest in *Beloved*. *Beloved* is the main text experiments with one of the most transformative experiences in African American history: American chattel slavery. It further instilled quests for freedom, humanity, and justice into the heart of the Black community. One may imagine the Black standing at a crossroads: defining and increasingly educating itself on its innate humanity while also battling the trauma from the past. Can one forget the past for the future and is there even a self to bring into the future? TQE mediates between past and future.

There are many important parts in Beloved's monologues, but the following two excerpts incorporate relevant ideas for this thesis:

> All of it is now  it is always now  there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too  I am always crouching  the man on my face is dead  his face is not mine  his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked (*Beloved* 248)

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> I am Beloved and she is mine. Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where we sleep. She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea. Sethe went into the sea. . .Sethe is the face I found and lost in the water under the bridge. (*Beloved* 253)

At first glance, Beloved's monologues could be interpreted as a slave's account on a slave ship, but the monologues could also provide hints on her origins and purpose. In the first excerpt, the reader has to interpret what they believe to be "it." In the novel itself, the paragraph before the excerpt discusses a flower picking scene, and the paragraph after discusses inedible or disgusting food and harsh conditions seemingly on a ship. Neither one defines the excerpt's it. The first

excerpt seems to be slightly disjointed from those surrounding passages. If one substitutes "it" for words such as I, me, the quest, or the experience, Beloved's becomes TQE. The words "now" and "always" mean "at the present time or moment" and "for all time, forever; for or throughout a long period" respectively (*OED*). There is no past or ending to her or the quest experience even though she narrates mostly past events. The phrase, "there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too," demonstrates that Beloved has some sort of omniscient perception while also being a part of a group. Her crouching symbolizes two things: she is able to remain in the shadows and she is always prepared to pounce or as Anderson states, "Beloved may have disappeared from 124, but she is not completely gone. She can reappear any time her cultural work is needed" (Anderson 94). But the others are also waiting and watching. The others are those "Beloved" type characters or ancestors that one may find in each novel. Those characters have either been taught ancestral knowledge from TQE or they are spiritual manifestations of TQE. They are her helpers or the experience that must reach the quester. The first excerpt also uncovers a divide between man and woman during the African American quest. In parallel to "the men without skin," the man on top of Beloved also lacks a part of himself (*Beloved* 253). In this instance, it is his life. His absence of life means he is literally dead, and it figuratively means that the self or his source of livelihood may be absent. Many men throughout Morrison's novels cope with this absence alongside their female counterparts, but the phrase "his face is not mine" elucidates that one group remains distant from the other. Women are often oblivious to how they have the ability to expose the men not only to the power of femininity but also teach them about themselves. The last line also expounds upon the male questers' blindness due to their detrimental patriarchy and how it also aids in their separation from the feminine. They are able to speak kind words and sympathize like Paul D, but

until they encounter TQE, they are unable to truly understand the depth of Black women's quests and how they too can play a role in that home that both groups seek.

In contrast, the second excerpt includes more physical details like yellow flowers, green leaves, a quilt, the sea, and a bridge. From these objects, there are two main physical aspects that assist TQE: nature and quilting. Not only do the questers have to move through physical spaces such as forests and bodies of water, but her characters must encounter physical spaces that are controlled by TQE, meaning she manipulates spaces to convey signs or warnings to the questers. This manipulation is imprinted on the characters' bodies and memories (Sethe's tree) and are sites of connection between characters and novels. For example, in the quotation, Sethe separates flowers from their stems. This analogy describes Beloved's murder in terms that her mother may understand, which shows a connection between the natural and feminine. Removing petals from their leaves stunts their growth. They become disconnected from their main source of survival. The key word is "took," which means "to deprive a person of or remove (something) unlawfully" (*OED*). Sethe did not ask to remove the flowers; she took it upon herself to disconnect them. Her actions not only disconnected her daughter from a life facilitated by motherhood, but she also isolated herself from her community leading to memory repression on all sides. But Beloved also attempts to reveal that this disconnection could be mended. Sethe places the flowers on a quilt—a symbol of unification. One can find this symbol throughout most of her novels. It is an activity that stitches and joins pieces of materials, most of the time differing in color or size, together into one piece. Quilts or quilting transforms a feminine, domestic activity into a symbol for individual and communal unification. Lastly, the second excerpt contains many references to the sea and water. Beloved could be describing the moments before her murder, but it could be describing the Middle Passage. Both moments represent separation, identity fragmentation, and desperation

felt in both parallel memories. Because both events happen near or in water, her substituting one memory for another conveys the fluidity of experience and how water is a conduit for experience. It is no coincidence that most of the novels' transformative moments happen near or in water. Similar to how bodies of water are connected either physically or through the water cycle, human experience joins one questing figure to another.

From the above analysis, there are two different dimensions within The Morrison Quest: the spiritual and physical. The dimensions' fluidity causes difficulty in separating the two, but this thesis parses out the characteristics of both to display each's impact on the character and their quest. In the quest's spiritual dimension, the quester must participate in some sort of vocal activity particularly storytelling. Storytelling encourages rememory and acts communication between TQE, ancestors, and questers. The elder and ancestors occasionally tell stories to reconnect questers to their individuality and community, which defines the quest. In the quest's physical dimension, trees and water are not only land markers; they are used as signs or symbols to warn or relay information to the questers. The physical dimension is very much connected to the questers' physical spaces and bodies. This thesis explores how obsessive female or male spaces can create separation, which hinders the progress of both groups.

Each novel contains a group of quest helpers, major and minor, who help the questers throughout their journeys. TQE and ancestor figures affect the quests' trajectories. Beginning with *Beloved*, Anderson comments on the specter beings in the text:

> Morrison creates in *Beloved* two specters working in tandem to produce healing. . . [Beloved] opens the line of communication between Sethe and Denver. . .[and] jolts Denver out of her fear and isolation by disclosing secrets of her mother's past, but Baby

> Suggs finishes Beloved's spirit work by comforting her granddaughter in her time of extremity and teaching her how to digest what she has learned of the past. (Anderson 78)

In this passage, Anderson clearly states that there are at least two figures that control the quests. The ancestor, Baby Suggs, has the power to "prepare the way for Beloved's full-body manifestation" and/or end the process (Anderson 77). Beloved/TQE controls the quester's deconstruction. In this middle ground, Beloved reopens channels of memory, which open channels between individuals and the community.

**Baby Suggs**

The ancestor is able to teach and lead everyone in her respective novel. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs not only impacts Denver's quest, but almost every single person from Sweet Home to Ohio. The reader first encounters Baby Suggs's absence and death from 124. Before her death, Morrison writes that Baby Suggs was "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (*Beloved* 4). Baby Suggs' ancestral qualities are the ability to mediate between the dead and living. TQE teaches her what her duties would become in the Ohio community. As soon as Mr. Garner, her previous owner, takes her into free territory, Baby Suggs wonders:

> She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly 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 new: her own heartbeat. (*Beloved* 166)

As if awakened from a slumber, Baby Suggs understands her purpose from that moment on—to not only offer "her great big heart" but also teach the community how to love and use theirs (*Beloved* 103). Her main teaching moments take place in The Clearing. Through her unorthodox preaching, she tells the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry. Eventually, "Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed,

children cried" (*Beloved* 103). Her one mantra is for them to love themselves but most importantly "love [their] heart. For this is the prize" (*Beloved* 104). Baby Suggs creates a fluid experience where no one emotion or action belongs solely to men, women, or children, meaning that there is no essential feminine, masculine, or infantile experience. Her preaching resists stereotypical knowledge that objectifies Black bodies and attempts to place them in one mass group. This moment is an instance where an ancestor explicitly tells her community how to find selfhood and how to use that individuality to connect with each other. Baby Suggs's character emphasizes the mortality of the ancestral figure. The ancestral figure can die and leave her questers, and the community has the ability to ostracize their ancestral figure. When the ancestor no longer lives, all quests stagnate, and everyone becomes comfortable with their disconnection and lack of selfhood. Morrison confirms this behavior when she says, "It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray" **(**"Rootedness" 62). Baby Suggs' death purposefully leads to the mysterious appearance of TQE. With the physical absence of Baby Suggs, the community was in a need of rescue, so TQE decides to help by going to the source of the isolation—124 Bluestone Road.

**Sorrow, Florens' mother, and The Blacksmith in *A Mercy***

*A Mercy*, set in a time before *Beloved*, ancestors and TQE seem non-existent, but the character Florens is the key. Anderson states that "after a life of seeking love and acceptance from others and feeling rejection, Florens must come to terms with her own individuality" (Anderson 132). Who are the ancestor and elder who guide Florens' quest? During this time period, the slave trade is fairly new and TQE and the ancestors are underdeveloped and disconnected from their questers, but they all, including Florens, have to become more developed. As Anderson states:

> Unlike the characters in the post-Civil War setting of *Beloved*, the characters in this novel are still being moved like pieces in a checkers game, to borrow imagery from Baby Suggs, and there is no distance from the trauma for a spectral guide like Beloved…to help negotiate. (Anderson 143).

The characters in *A Mercy*, even though some are enslaved and indentured, have considerably more access to their own humanity and environment. The women create their own community while the men are away. Some of the characters, except for a few, seem to have less progress during their quests because slavery has yet to fully invade their selves and community. Sorrow, Florens' mother, and the Blacksmith come together to create Florens as a more developed ancestor.

When the reader first receives any biographical information about Sorrow, they receive these details:

> Sorrow had never lived on land. Now the memories of the ship, the only home she knew, seemed as stolen as its cargo… After searching for survivors and food, fingering spilt molasses from the deck straight into her mouth, nights listening to cold wind and lapping sea, Twin joined her under the hammock and they have been together ever since. (*A Mercy* 138)

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> Light-headed and wobbly, Sorrow put on the dry boy clothes, then followed a scent of food. Once fed an extravagant breakfast, she was alert enough to say things but not recall things. When they asked her name, Twin whispered NO, so she shrugged her shoulders and found that a convenient gesture for the other information she could not or pretended not to remember. (*A Mercy* 140)

Sorrow shares striking similarities to the Beloved character. Beginning with their names, Be-Loved is a command. Sorrow can also be a verb or command meaning to "grieve" and "lament" (*OED*). Her nickname is a command to grieve the self from TQE. Sorrow's physical body may only be a temporary medium for TQE similar to the body that she inhabits in *Beloved*. Sorrow's character have two inhabitants in her body—an unknown woman and "Twin." Twin "was her safety, her entertainment, [and] her guide" (*A Mercy* 141). In retrospect, one never discovers the real name of Beloved's character, also. In *A Mercy*, TQE deliberately tells the unknown woman not to reveal her true identity; the message of her name outweighs who she actually is. Sorrow also has a connection to the water and being on a ship, and she finds Twin's face under the hammock similar to how Beloved finds Sethe's face under the bridge[10]. Their relationship illuminates what TQE may teach her ancestors:

> Sorrow. . .slept and woke, lulled continuously by Twin's voice describing the thousandfold men walking the waves, singing wordlessly. How their teeth glittered more than the whitecaps under their feet. How, as the sky darkened and the moon rose, the edges of their night-black skin silvered. How the smell of land, ripe and loamy, brightened the eyes of the crew but made the sea walkers cry. (*A Mercy* 144).

In her essay "*Bakulu* Discourse: The Language of the Margin in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Sharon P. Holland claims that "in lower Zaire that deceased ancestors become white creatures called *bakulu* who inhabit villages of the dead located under river beds or lake bottoms"

[10] Another instance that demonstrates The Quest Experience's connection to Sorrow: "High pitched and low, the screams were far away, on the other side of the white clouds surrounding her. Horses, too. Pounding hooves. Freed from below. Leaping over sacks of grain and kicking barrels until the staves broke and a thick sweet blackness poured out. Still, [Sorrow] could not move or tear through the clouds. Pushing, pushing, she fell to the floor while the clouds covered and smothered her whole self, convincing her the screams belonged to gulls. When she came to, eyes, the shape and color of her own, greeted her. The puffy clouds, mere threads now, drifted away. "I'm here,' said the girl with a face matching her own exactly. "I'm always here." (*A Mercy* 149). Beloved also speaks of clouds and this could be Sorrow's memory on the ship. In this moment, the two seem to be connecting on the brink of Sorrow's death.

(Holland 91). The information TQE tells Sorrow parallels Holland's quotation. Her information reveals TQE origins and that there is an entire community waiting and watching under the waters.

Despite all of these similarities, TQE never convinces the community to accept Sorrow as their ancestor. Everyone looks down upon her, but TQE attempts to keep impacting the unknown woman's quest for self. Sorrow also becomes pregnant, and Morrison allows the reader to experience this birth. During this process, Twin disappears, Sorrow changes her behavior, but most importantly she says, "'I am your mother,' she said. 'My name is Complete.'" (*A Mercy* 158). These quotations have two interpretations: Sorrow or the unknown woman starts a new aspect of motherhood that one can see in characters like Sethe: obsessive motherhood, and she has finally awakened to the power of femininity and birth that she has learned from TQE, which results in her completeness. Despite either interpretation, Sorrow/unknown woman now is able to rename herself and her daughter and pass her quest knowledge down to her daughter.

Returning to live with Complete and the others is the last step of Florens' quest to finding herself and being transformed into a developed ancestor figure. Her quest's beginning, middle and end are heavily influenced by TQE's underdeveloped spectral manifestation of Florens' mother and the Blacksmith's misunderstanding. The reader only receives Florens' understanding of her mother's willingness to give her up. Anderson states, "In her mind, the primal scene of rejection—her mother pleading with Vaark to take Florens and sending her away, all while holding the hand of Florens's younger brother—colors every action of her life" (Anderson 138). In a sense, Florens' mother's absence begins her daughters quest even before she encounters the Blacksmith. In the beginning and throughout her quest, Florens expresses a sense of disconnection and selflessness when she declares, "My head is light with the confusion of two

things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost" and "And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live" (*A Mercy* 5, 44). Her mother's spectral presence and voice, used by TQE, attempts to warn her against her selflessness:

> In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her. (*A Mercy* 119)
>
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>
> A minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something. I tell her to go and when she fades I hear a small creaking. (*A Mercy* 161)

Before the first quotation happens, Florens dreams of cherry trees walking towards her. The cherry trees could be a reference to Sethe's chokecherry tree in the future. The chokecherry tree and the invasion of patriarchy, has yet to fully imprint itself on Florens' body, but the trees' walking towards her represents that they are coming. To juxtapose Florens' mother and brother to the cherry tree dream, it may mean that her mother wants to prepare her for this journey or fight; she desires to give Florens her shoes so that she may keep her tenderness and be protected from what is coming for her. As the two quotations convey, Florens fails to listen, so she chooses the difficult route towards selfhood. Florens' obsessiveness and need for a mother leads her to attack the Blacksmith's little male orphan. All her life she has competed against maleness for love. The Blacksmith, also influenced by TQE, teaches and commands her: "Own yourself, woman, and leave us be." and "as I live and breathe, a slave by choice" (*A Mercy* 166-167). His masculinity and free status make him distant and unwilling to understand Florens' psychological turmoil, but his harsh statements expose her to the truth—she has placed her sense of self under someone else's control who could possibly abandon her. His commands signify a beginning to

the Be-Loved message. Similar to Sethe, she attempts to kill what embodies her selfhood[11]. Through this extreme expression of anger, Florens is able to face her repressed pain to start a new chapter in her life.

The end of the novel demonstrates a rise to power for Florens as the developed ancestor and a plea from TQE. Florens states, "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last." (*A Mercy* 189). This is the ancestor declaring that she understands the message to be loved. No longer does she equate life and herself with the Blacksmith. She boldly proclaims that she is Florens, which means "to bloom or flower" (*OED*). She is now able to create life out of a wasteland with her knowledge and guide others towards selfhood and self-love. The reader never knows whether or not Florens will choose to hear her mother and TQE, but she must especially if her and Sorrow/Complete fail to teach their community. TQE knows this, so she decides to try once more to connect through Florens' mother. Not only does Florens receive the opportunity to be taught "the violating experiences of slavery," but the reader also receives this information (Anderson 143). TQE through Florens' mother continues to reinforce the Be-Loved message,[12] but she leaves Florens and the reader with the command, "Hear a tua mãe," which is Portuguese for "hear your mother" (*A Mercy* 196). There are two possible voices: Florens' mother reaching out to her and TQE reaching out to all. For there to be a connection, there needs to be a story told and a story heard.

**Blue zoot suit man and Ethel Fordham in *Home***

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[11] As she attempts to kill her children, Sethe "heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her head cloth into her hair and beat their wings" (*Beloved* 192). Florens also has this same sensation: Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (*A Mercy* 167). This want to fly, and its unfolding could signify an inner character transformation.

[12] The message: "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thin; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (*A Mercy* 196).

*Home* and *God Help the Child* represent a more contemporary quest. Unlike *A Mercy*, the communities have a developed ancestor, but the quester remains disconnected from TQE because their inability to hear or see her clearly. In each novel, the disconnection increasingly worsens the more contemporary the novel. *Home* differs from the rest of the novels because it foregrounds the progress of a male quester, Frank Money, and how his sister, Cee, directs his quest home. But he is also similar to those like Sethe and Florens because he attempts to define his selfhood through others. TQE and the main ancestor remain absent until he begins his quest. The first time TQE appears is when Frank is on a train:

> He turned and, more amused than startled, examined his seat partner—a small man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His pale blue suit sported a long jacket and balloon trousers. His shoes were white with unnaturally pointed toes. The man stared ahead. Ignored, Frank leaned back to the window to pick up his nap. As soon as he did, the zoot-suited man got up and disappeared down the aisle. No indentation was left in the leather seat. (*Home* 27)

The blue zoot man reappears shortly after that once Frank has found his destination: "Then he saw the outline of the small man, the one from the train, his wide-brimmed hat unmistakable in the frame of light at the window. Frank reached for the bedside lamp. Its glow revealed the same little man in the pale blue zoot suit" (*Home* 33). The blue zoot man represents the presence of TQE . The first quotation has several references to *Beloved*, where TQE is the strongest, and to *A Mercy*. First, the color blue occurs frequently throughout *Beloved* through Baby Suggs' affinity for colors and her quilt. Sethe describes Baby Suggs' quilt as "made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown, and gray wool. . .in that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild—like life in the raw" (*Beloved* 46). The address of the house is 124 Bluestone Road. Sethe notices the

colors of the blanket once Beloved appears, which makes the house a midway place between the living and the dead; spirits are able to easily manifest in 124. In both *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, blue signifies water or the ocean especially through Beloved's monologues and Twin's story to Sorrow about the sea walkers. The blue zoot man's shoes can represent the sea walker's glittering teeth. All of this symbolic knowledge pertaining to the color blue and the ability to disappear so readily points towards TQE.

TQE remains silent throughout *Home*, but her sporadic appearances have symbolic weight. Similar to Florens, Frank fails to understand signs from TQE that expresses truth or a warning[13]. Before the first appearance of the zoot man, a wife tries to help her husband out of a conflict with a white crowd, but the crowd bloodies her nose with a rock. Frank discerns that "[the husband] couldn't protect himself and he couldn't protect her either. . .She would have to pay for that broken nose" (*Home* 46). Before the second appearance of the zoot man, Frank has a conversation with his new friend's son. Frank asks the boy what he would like to be when he grows up, and the boy replies, "A man" (*Home* 33). Both of these events simultaneously illustrate TQE showing Frank that he and the African American community lack connectivity. The husband and wife, a symbol for home, is broken and distant from each other. The husband has no sense of self and no sense of manhood, which makes him retaliate against the femininity that tries to save him. Frank's manhood is also questionable not only because he was a part of war and violence but also because of the young, Korean girl he murders due to his own perverted thoughts. For Frank to gain his manhood, he not only has to return home and reconnect with his

[13] Florens says, "Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast," and Frank also states "Damn! He didn't want some new dream ghost for company. Unless it was a sign trying to tell him something." (*A Mercy* 5, *Home* 34).

sister, the feminine force trying to save him, but he has to find a sense of self. This means claiming responsibility of the act of murder and facing all of his memories.

In the background, Cee is on her own quest for self-discovery. Similar to other female characters, the disconnected males around her attempt to understand her and her body through their blind, male gaze. It is there in Locust, Georgia, where Frank, Cee, and the reader have a late encounter with the community's ancestor—Miss Ethel Fordham. Miss Ethel is not only responsible for healing Cee's body but passing along the Be-Loved message to her:

> See what I mean? Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (*Home* 126)

Miss Ethel's words parallel the Blacksmith's and Paul D's words that declare that these women are their "best thing" (*Beloved* 322). The "seed your own land" phrase relates to Florens, the new ancestor in her novel, and how she receives the ability to grow something out of the wilderness. Miss Ethel wants Cee to know that despite being perceived as both weak and young, she no longer has to depend on maleness to save her. The force of the feminine and her selfhood have been inside of her all along. As Cee and Frank are on the brink of a new quest together and they are literally burying the past by the stream, Cee spots "a small man in a funny suit swinging a watch chain. And grinning" (*Home* 144). The blue zoot man/TQE seems pleased that both have found their humanity, but only time will tell. The swinging watch chain could be TQE quietly expressing that she controls these quests, and she will return just like the hands on a clock always touches the same numbers with regularity.

**Queen and Booker's letters in *God Help the Child***

TQE has seemingly disappeared altogether in *God Help the Child*, but the ancestor appears strong at the end of the quests. The main questers are Bride, a superficial "renaissance" woman, and Booker who is a man living in the past. In this text, the ancestor is Queen, a distant aunt of Booker. After the tragic death of his brother, Adam, Booker discovers that he, too, has no sense of self. As ancestor, Queen purposefully tells him "'Don't let him go. . .Not until he's ready. Meantime, hang on to him tooth and claw. Adam will let you know when it's time" (*God Help the Child* 117). This advice contrasts with former characters' understanding of "too thick" love (*Beloved* 193). She encourages him to hang on to the ghost of his brother so that he can have a purpose, start his quest to her in California, and not participate in the repressive tendencies of the African American community and in his own family. The reader may consider TQE deploying a new strategy for a new era. The motivation to keep his brother's ghost alive makes him not only want to educate himself but avenge his death by serving justice to pedophiles.

Bride's and Booker's quests both merge around Queen. Bride starts her quest due to Booker's absence and receives guidance and help from minor, white quest helpers. Queen tells Bride, "Adam's death became his own life. I think it's his only life," so now her job is not only to help Booker but also Bride to find a better and healthier sense of self (*God Help the Child* 147). First, Bride hesitates to confront Booker, but she must confront him, so both can start undoing their past with child abuse. Queen starts singing a song about not going on in "the voice of a baby," and Bride responds, "This is about me, not him. Me!" (*God Help the Child* 152). Here, the reader observes Bride finally asserting a self not tied to beauty products or her abusive childhood.

The last step in both of their quests is literal and figurative death and rebirth. In this part of the novel, one can see TQE's spiritual presence and manipulation becoming stronger:

> It began slowly, gently, as it often does: shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way, slithering tentatively at first because who knows how it might turn out, then gaining confidence in the ecstasy of air, of sunlight, for there was neither in the weeds where it had curled. (*God Help the Child* 164)

At first, the reader does not know who or what causes the action, but the quotation resembles the TQE's crouching quotation earlier in this chapter. Whatever the object is, at first, it hides just like TQE has the ability to hide herself or crouch in the shadows while waiting. The slowness is also characteristic of how Beloved slowly emerges from the stream by 124. If this is TQE, the fire that results from this passage and in Queen's awful injuries is the doing of TQE. The ancestor becomes hurt for the benefit of the questers. As a consequence, Bride and Booker start "thinking not of themselves, but of helping somebody else" (*God Help the Child* 167). Bride gains her womanhood, and both questers are able to maturely discuss the past and convene as a couple without disconnection. In other novels also, there must be death or absence so that the quester may continue progressing. A virus/TQE, "as sneaky and evil as the flame that had destroyed [Queen's] home," results in Queen's death (*God Help the Child* 172). Her ashes reunite with TQE and the other community of ancestors in the stream. Morrison juxtaposes Queen's untimely and mysterious death with Bride's pregnancy announcement. This could not only represent new beginnings and a new aspect of motherhood in the modern era, but it could also stand for TQE exchanging energy from Queen's death to the birth of a new soul resulting in a possible, new beginning for Queen as ancestor.

Instead of physically appearing in *God Help the Child*, TQE also uses Booker's writing to channel her voice. When he first begins writing, "he began trying to shape unpunctuated sentences into musical language that expressed his questions about or results of his thinking" (*God Help the Child* 122-23). Below are excerpts that he wrote for Bride and his brother:

| | |
|---|---|
| "You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger's curse and the mindless menace it holds with the scar it leaves as a definition you spend your life refuting" (*God Help the Child* 148) | "I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slaveowner could have done it better." (*God Help the Child* 161) |

Booker's letters follow the pattern of Beloved's monologues. Both the first monologue and the first excerpt have no punctuation and no definite voice, subject, or listener, while the second monologue and second excerpt incorporate more punctuation and structure. On the other hand, some of Beloved's monologues have spaces in the place of punctuation, but Booker's letters flow with no spaces. This could symbolize that now TQE sees a less fragmented and disconnected future in the form of Bride and her unborn child. Most of the letters are directed towards Bride, but they also give insight into all the quests seen so far. The reader can see Sethe's presence and her scars in the first one, but it could also stand for all the women and men who have had to quest for self-discovery or home under TQE. Patriarchy, white supremacy, and other factors that created "under every dark skin. . .a jungle" effected how they treated themselves, their children, and their communities (*Beloved* 234). The second quotation is an apology from Booker to his brother, but also it could be TQE voicing the multitude of women and their daughters throughout Morrison's canon. Bride comes from a long line of women who have tried to control the destinies of their daughters only to create a dangerous cycle. Now that

TQE has let the voices speak and apologize to the future generations, maybe the cycle will take on a more positive turn. Bride and Booker now see how physical slavery caused personal enslavement. As the new generation of questers and ancestors, it is their turn to teach selfhood.

This being Morrison's last book at the moment, along with Queen's "fire red hair," uncovers another quest connecting each text—the presence of the quilt (*God Help the Child* 117). Janice Daniel states in her essay "Function or Frill: The Quilt as Storyteller in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" that:

> the quilt's role is to hold together in the reader's mind a continuous, fluid story that might otherwise be further disjointed or fragmented. Just as a quilt's backing holds its many squares in their places to form a discernable pattern, Morrison's quilt provides coherences for her story's design. (Daniel 327)

With the quilt symbol, it is not only a symbol for storytelling, but also its presence distinguishes a fluid connection between all these women and spectral beings. *A Mercy*'s Sorrow character also has hair "the color of a setting sun" (*A Mercy* 59). In Baby Suggs' blanket, there are two orange patches amongst the other colors that Beloved "seemed totally taken with. . .[she] even made the effort to lean on her elbow and stroke them" (*Beloved* 65). Because both of them have orange/red hair, the two orange patches represent the current beginning and end of TQE's ancestral network in Morrison's canon. Throughout her novel, Beloved only has a few moments where Morrison shows her nurturing something without pain or selfish desire. TQE strokes these two patches, Sorrow and Queen, because they are the bridge and the community that she has been growing consistently throughout each novel. It is no coincidence that Sethe is "lying under a quilt of merry colors" (*Beloved* 319). The presence of this network is seen through three of the four novels: *Beloved, Home*, and *God Help the Child*. In *Home*, Cee learns how to quilt from

Miss Ethel and the other women and eventually uses it to bury the bones of a dead man. In *God Help the Child*, Queen also sewed and knitted and has "a quilt on the headboard of an empty bed" (*God Help the Child* 145). All of this symbolizes not only the beginning of Sethe's new quest out of the darkness, but also TQE's hope that she will continue to grow this ancestral network. Then, there will be no more dark patches in the African American self and community.

## Chapter 3: "Things you could Trust and be Near": Trees, Streams, Bodies, and Physical Spaces in The Morrison Quest's Physical Dimension

Returning to Greek myth, nature often plays an essential role in the physical dimension of the quest. Its roles can range from quest helper to a marker of the quester's progression or transformation. In his book titled *Forms of Astonishment: Greek Myths of Metamorphosis*, Richard Buxton discusses the connection between nature and humanity:

> The indeterminate nature of tree nymphs implies that the boundary between the plant world and the anthropomorphic world is, or may sometimes be, porous. The same implication is present, albeit differently so, in the belief that human beings were originally generated from trees. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* the Bronze Race, third in time after those of Gold and Silver, is said to have been created by Zeus *ek melian*, 'from ash trees' (143-5). (Buxton 213)

Buxton argues that the distinction between the natural world and humanity may not be as structured as it seems. The Greek belief that humans originate from trees may represent their idea that humanity has a responsibility or a familial relation towards its plant family members. The word porous also demonstrates that one form is not necessarily more secure than the other. Resembling a cell's membrane, one may be able to fluidly move between both worlds based on whatever purpose needs to be fulfilled. An example is the cupid figure in Apuleius's "Psyche and Cupid" story. Venus forces Psyche to complete a set of seemingly impossible tasks. The first task is to separate a pile of seeds into separate piles; the second task is to obtain a small sample of golden fleece; and the third task is to visit the underworld to obtain some of Persephone's beauty. Throughout all of these tasks, some form of nature assists her to complete them. A colony of ants separates the seeds for her. The water nymphs and reeds tell her the best way to obtain the fleece. Lastly, the rocky crag whispers advice on navigating the underworld. One may

wonder why these natural spirts felt obligated to help Psyche. Revisiting Kenney's quote from the first chapter, "In the first place, [Psyche's] invariable reaction on being confronted with each successful trial is despair, and in each case, it is only the power of Cupid that sees her through," is a possible answer (Kenney 14). There is a possible correlation between Cupid's need to help her and nature's willingness to complete her tasks. If Cupid can in fact control nature, does it mean that he can embody it to manipulate it for his needs? Another instance that Greek myth ponders is the presence of the physical body and how it is either transformed or created. The Scylla figure is another prime example from chapter one. One is transformed from a young girl to a bird, while another is a six headed, twelve-legged sea monster[14]. These female bodies are markers created out of male fear[15], which causes their patriarchal gazes to invade, in a sense, the feminine body. In these myths, that male invasion warned males against wild and angry women; on the other hand, in Morrison's novels, male invasion can have a complicated and occasionally detrimental effect on the female characters and the surrounding community. In this thesis, TQE connects to but also complicates how nature is seen and controlled in Greek myth. On the one hand, she is able to control and embody natural elements similar to Cupid. On the other hand, each tree or stream does not have its own individualism or as Buxton says, "each tree, it was widely assumed, possessed its own sacred individuality" (Buxton 210). Instead, TQE solely manipulates the natural world for the quest experience, which either means helping or warning

[14] Another example could be the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Pygmalion, a Greek sculptor, aspires to create the perfect woman, so he sculpts one out of marble. Aphrodite/Venus pities him and transforms the sculpture into a real woman named Galatea.

[15] From chapter one: "The Scylla figure in both texts seem to be 'manifestations of a fear of female envelopment' and 'the narrowness and rigidity of the Greek ideal of femininity, precariously positioned between the twin dangers of excessively aggressive and defensive female sexuality' (Hopman 10)".

the quester on his or her way. TQE accomplishes this effect in many ways, but this thesis will mostly cover her use of trees and streams in this manner.

Starting with trees, in her essay "Hiding Fire and Brimstone in Lacy Groves: The Twinned Trees of *Beloved*," Lorie Watkins Fulton proposes two purposes of the tree symbol in *Beloved*:

> Morrison shows how slavery systematically misrepresents itself as a natural order, but actually operates antithetically to naturalize, superficially, the unnatural. Her depiction also subverts the idea of growth as inherently constructive; positive growth seems balanced, or in some cases even counteracted, by the destructive growth of objects like that jungle originating within each slave and the scar on Sethe's back. (Fulton 197).

Even though Fulton's two propositions do not directly connect with quest, they do show a possible duality of nature, especially trees, in Morrison's novels. That duality being trees simultaneously representing sites of nurturing/teaching and deconstruction/warning. Both sites can combine to unravel the questers' understanding of their world, themselves, and others, while also teaching them how to rebuild and connect those relationships. The site could also be a warning not only for that process of deconstruction and reconstruction but also a warning to help them progress through their physical and spiritual quests. Her phrase "how slavery literally perverts nature" will be studied as the experience of (white) patriarchy in our society imprinted upon or invading the Black body, especially Black female bodies. (White) patriarchy disrupts the natural order (Black identity, Black bodies, and the environment) to attempt to teach whiteness as the natural[16]. This results in not only a war on Black presence and Earth itself but also a

[16] Michéle Bonnet states: "The most salient feature of the tree is that it is identified with Life—a sign of the influence of African religion, which holds that trees concentrate within themselves the vital force that flows through and animates the universe (Thomas 110)" (Bonnet 42). If trees are a symbol for life and Morrison shows African American's in close proximity to trees, everything else could be interpreted as dangerous or unnatural.

fragmentation or disconnection amongst those groups. The ancestors attempt to demonstrate the inherent constructiveness of trees and their gardens to their communities, while the TQE exposes each character's inner "destructive growth of objects like that jungle" (Fulton 197). All of this is constructed and controlled experientially by TQE. The first prevalent warning (or site of deconstruction) sent from TQE is the minor thread of logging or the preparing of timber shown throughout some of the texts. This collective warning exposes the ever-growing distance between the Black community and the network of the elder and ancestors. Two examples will be shown from *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. Beginning with *Beloved*, as Paul D, Sethe, and Denver walk to the carnival, they walk along a lumberyard fence covered in climbing roses. Morrison writes:

> Up and down the lumberyard fence old roses were dying. The sawyer who had planted them twelve years ago to give his workplace a friendly feel—something to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living—was amazed by their abundance. . .the closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent, and everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of the rotten roses. It made them a little dizzy and very thirsty. . . (*Beloved* 57)

In this quotation, Morrison juxtaposes a lumberyard, the killing of trees, with the growth of dying roses. Fulton comments on Michéle Bonnet's essay "'To take the sin out of slicing trees…': The Law of the Tree in *Beloved,*" "Even the quotation at the center of Bonnet's reading seems fundamentally conflicted because the roses that the sawyer plants do not expiate his guilt; rather than creating the 'friendly feel' that he aimed for, the roses crawl over everything, and their scent sickens all who pass by them" (Fulton 189). To take Fulton's claim one step further, if trees are a representation of life and a "vital force that flows through and animates the universe," a lumber yard stands for the death of that vital force, which symbolizes a

disconnection from something great and important; in Morrison's novels, it is TQE (Bonnet 42). The dying roses could be a figurative representation of the people in Sethe's community. As they live, grow, and die, they unknowingly cling or live amidst this disconnection from TQE, from themselves, and from each other. Interestingly, the sawyer planted the roses 12 years ago; twelve years ago,[17] takes place before Baby Suggs' death but is in close proximity to the death of Sethe's daughter who supposedly reappears shortly after this carnival trip. It is also worthy to note that the passersby "associated" the scent they smelled with the roses; they do not know definitely that the smell comes from the roses themselves or from something else. The way the roses affect them (dizziness and thirst) point towards TQE because Beloved emerges from the stream, which correlates with their thirst, while they are all at the carnival. In saying that, TQE could be manipulating the roses not only to expose the community adhering to their own destruction but also to announce her coming.

In *A Mercy*, TQE emphasizes its absence through Jacob's constant need to build houses. As Lina observes the building activities, she reflects, "[Jacob] decided to kill the trees, and replace them with a profane monument to himself, he was cheerful every waking moment" and "Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune. Sure enough, when the house was close to completion he fell sick with nothing else on his mind" (*A Mercy* 51). Some derivative of the phrase "kill the trees" appears in both quotations and the phrase "a profane monument to himself" appears in the first quotation. A statement from Morrison's essay "Rootedness" relates to the quotations' emphasis on the human self versus the murder of trees:

[17] Morrison writes: "For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends."

> The autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, "My single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative." The contemporary autobiography tends to be "how I got over—look at me—alone—let me show you how I did it." It is inimical, I think, to some of the characteristics of Black artistic expression and influence. ("Rootedness" 57)

Even though the statement primarily explores the distinction between autobiography and contemporary autobiography, it can also shed light on Jacob's demise. As Morrison moves from the more balanced autobiographical form to the less balanced one, she begins to use dashes. According to the textbook *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*, dashes are used "to set off any asides or interrupting structure within the sentence" and/or "to call attention to an appositive" (Kolln 239). The separation created by the dashes really emphasizes that the contemporary autobiography encourages just individualism without the balance of the surrounding community. In regard to nouns, Morrison emphasizes even more the connection between selfhood and the community. In the first half of the quotation, the noun "life" is constantly repeated, while the second half lacks any nouns that represent life or "the tribe." This shows that the former promotes life of not only the individual but also their community, but the latter may be detrimental to the life force of both. Rather than improve his individual life to improve the lives and the environment around him, Jacob kills not for the trees, not in remembrance of the trees, but for his own selfish pleasure and needs. Similar to the three dashes in Morrison's quotation, his three houses progressively fragment and distance not only his relationship to the TQE but the relationships of his immediate and adopted family members to

the TQE, which results in his death, his children's death, and the deterioration of the bonds between the remaining women. Lastly, it is intriguing that Morrison uses the word malfortune instead of its more well-known and older form, misfortune. The prefix mal- not only characterizes "ill, wrong, improper," but the first part of the word closely imitates the word male, as in gender (*OED*). Morrison uses this to demonstrate that Jacob's maleness could also be contributing to his inability to fully understand nature's importance and how he is impacting the world around him. Due to *A Mercy*'s time period, Jacob is a symbol for the increasing white male invasion of the world's natural resources and bodies (natural and human).

Morrison's streams and bodies of water are also significant to her characters' quests; in saying that, similar to trees, streams also have a dual purpose. Anissa Janine Wardi, in her book titled *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*, best expresses water's dual nature: "Morrison renders water, a site of danger and a space of absolution, as a carrier of African Diasporic history" (Wardi 65). Water is not only a vehicle for memory and connection but also a site of deconstruction/warning similar to trees. Morrison makes the streams, rivers, and bodies of water accessible to TQE to also relay the message that the Black community is in need for her and each other. Two examples will also be used here from *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. One small but significant moment from *Beloved* involves Stamp Paid and his rememory while he walks towards 124. He remembers finding a red ribbon while on the bank of the Licking River:

> He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp…On the way home, he stopped, short of breath and dizzy…Rested, he got to his feet, but before he took a step he turned to look back down the road he was traveling and said, to its frozen mud and the river beyond, "What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they? (*Beloved* 213)

This memory beside the river transforms Stamp Paid's understanding of Baby Suggs' final resignation to the cruel world to the point where he wants to repent for "mistaking her, upbraiding her, owing her, now he needed to let her know he knew, and to get right with her and her kin" (*Beloved* 213). Stamp Paid's dizziness and breathlessness resembles how the sawyer's roses effect the community. This is a sign that TQE is attempting to announce and expose something to Stamp Paid. The above quotation exemplifies a sense of brokenness through the piece of scalp and ribbon. It is not a complete head; it is only a small piece floating in the river. It is no coincidence that the scalp belonged to a little girl. Stamp Paid's and the rest of the community's jealously aided in distracting Baby Suggs and Sethe from noticing the slave catching party, resulting in the death of the "crawling-already?" girl[18]; they, ultimately, turned their backs on the women in 124 after the incident. His rememory not only recounts his own contribution to the community's brokenness and eventually Denver's isolation but it also describes the brokenness of America's national community—white people devaluing Black bodies, which widens the gulf between both communities and the brokenness of both.

One of TQE's warning about disconnection/brokenness manifests in one of Florens' dreams. In the dream, she is "at the edge of a [blue] lake":

> There is a sweet smell and I lean close to get it. But the perfume goes away. . .I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want? I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance. Grass that is glossy, long, and wet. Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. (*A Mercy* 162).

[18] Morrison writes: "Baby closed her eyes. Perhaps they were right. Suddenly, behind the disapproving odor, way way back behind it, she smelled another thing. Dark and coming. Something she couldn't get at because the other odor hid it" (*Beloved* 163).

The sweet smell coincides with the presence of a smell in all the other moments. Here, color and smell reflect back not only to the roses in *Beloved* but also to Sethe's quilt[19] of merry colors. Parallel to the Beloved character, Florens also lacks a face in the water. Instead of discovering the face of her mother, Florens' face remains absent. This could be interpreted in two ways: Florens' disconnection from her mother and/or her disconnection from herself. If the quilt signifies TQE's future ancestral network, Florens' inability to reach the perfume, see her face, or touch the blue in the water reveals that her quest is for a sense of self. Once she obtains that sense of self, she will be able to touch the blue, meaning she will finally be a part of the quilt and the ancestral network.

**Trees, Streams, and Other Physical Spaces: Sites of Nurturing/Teaching and Deconstruction/Warning**

Additionally, TQE can combine the duality of trees, water, and other spaces in the quester's environment to create more powerful sites of nurturing/teaching and deconstruction/warning. In this section, I will go through each of the four novels to demonstrate how the different sites can nurture the questers in their time of need but at the same time warn them and deconstruct their selfless identity for the sake of their growth and progression.

***Beloved*: The Clearing**

Bonnet interprets The Clearing as "a metaphorical connotation of spiritual cleansing," while Fulton adds a more negative sense of The Clearing alongside the positive, "In fact, the enchantment of the Clearing ultimately renders the site most dangerous, for there, Sethe becomes

[19] Refer to chapter two: "It is no coincidence that Sethe is "lying under a quilt of merry colors" (*Beloved* 319). The presence of this network is seen through three of the four novels: *Beloved, Home*, and *God Help the Child*. In *Home*, Cee learns how to quilt from Miss Ethel and the other women and eventually uses it to bury the bones of a dead man. In *God Help the Child*, Queen also sewed and knitted and has "a quilt on the headboard of an empty bed" (*God Help the Child* 145). All of this symbolizes not only the beginning of Sethe's new quest out of the darkness, but also The Quest Experience's hope that she will continue to grow this ancestral network. Then, there will be no more dark patches in the African American self and community" (Murray 25-6).

convinced that Beloved embodies the spirit of her murdered child" (Bonnet 43, Fulton 192). Both of these interpretations demonstrate the duality of The Clearing. Despite its stationary location, The Clearing obviously is significant in the community's, Sethe's, and Denver's quest towards home/selfhood. The Clearing itself is "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place" (*Beloved* 102). From an aerial view, The Clearing most likely appears like a circle in the trees with a line attached to it. Figuratively, one could say that it resembles a crude representation of a uterus; the trees circling it are the nurturing walls ready to nourish those who listen to Baby Suggs. The origins of The Clearing are unknown but not to those that cleared it and its natural inhabitants (deer). This could symbolize that The Clearing is truly a natural oasis cleared by those who either understood the power of nature or a spiritual presence ranging far beyond human knowledge.

The Clearing has one common factor: a mythical quilting space with Baby Suggs being the main quilter. Throughout several scenes in The Clearing, the reader observes Baby Suggs attempting to piece bodies and souls together to combat the destruction of (white) patriarchal invasion. This type of quilting coincides with The Clearing fluctuating between a site of teaching/nurturing and deconstruction/warning. The Clearing is at first a site of teaching/nurturing "where Baby delivers the fervent address urging her people to love and piece together the bodies that have been broken up by slavery, to re-member what has been dis-remembered" (Bonnet 144)[20]. It transforms into a site of teaching/deconstruction[21] when Sethe returns seeking out a sign and touch from Baby Suggs:

[20] Also, refer to Chapter two of this thesis pages 11 and 12.
[21] In regard to quilting, these sites could also be called "*un*doing ceremonies**" (**Hindman 113).

> The fingers touching the back of her neck were stronger now—the strokes bolder as though Baby Suggs were gathering strength. . .Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles on the way. Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled. . .the fingers left off and Sethe had to swallow huge draughts of air before she recognized her daughter's face next to her own and Beloved's hovering above. (*Beloved* 113)

This mysterious moment results in Sethe seeing Beloved in another light: "the suspicion that the girl's touch was also exactly like the baby's ghost dissipated" (*Beloved* 116). With these two moments juxtaposed to each other, the reader may notice a dual purpose of both scenes—to warn and start Sethe's process of reconstruction. Baby Suggs' touches are the warning and Beloved's touches are the start of deconstruction. Because Baby Suggs makes little circles before totally encircling Sethe's neck, which leads to Sethe choking, Baby Suggs could be attempting to remind Sethe of Nan's story of her origins. Nan reveals to Sethe that her mother "threw them all away but you. . .Without names, she threw them. . .You she gave the name of the black man" (*Beloved* 74). With Baby Suggs' circles representing the iron circles around the slaves' necks, she returns Sethe to the slave ship environment and her mother's experience. The first loving touches from Baby Suggs connect to Sethe's mother only caressing and hugging the Black man, which keeps Sethe in the position of the only one she kept. The transition to strangling places Sethe in her white/mixed siblings' place—thrown away into the water and left to drown. Baby Suggs wants to communicate that Sethe has lost herself; she has lost the self that her mother felt the need to name and save. While she drowns in the need to love her children, she is slowly

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Hindman, Jane E. "A little space, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness": African American Quiltmaking as metaphor in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, https://doi.org/10.1080/10436929508580151, pp. 101-120.

killing and losing herself in the process. The second version of touches from Beloved completely finishes breaking the wall between Sethe's memories and her personal life. It makes her susceptible to the power of TQE. Later on, Denver accuses Beloved of choking Sethe in The Clearing. Beloved responds, "'I fixed it, didn't I? Didn't I fix her neck?'" and "'I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it.'" (*Beloved* 119). This moment shows TQE stating that the deconstruction that she has started will eventually "fix" Sethe's selfhood. She will help Sethe regain that self that her mother saved and reverse the detrimental effects that "the circle of iron" caused on Black women and their relationship to motherhood.

In the end of the novel, readers see a return of The Clearing in a sense. Bonnet and other scholars realize the significance behind the women in the community returning to 124 to save Sethe. Bonnet states: "The Clearing's regenerating energy is perhaps even plainer in one of the last scenes of the novel when the women of the community gather in front of 124 to exorcise the spirit that has driven Sethe to the verge of death" (Bonnet 44). In this scene, Morrison writes:

> They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (*Beloved* 305)
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>
> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off the chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*Beloved* 308)

This scene is a part of Baby Suggs' quilting. Her spiritual presence encouraged Denver to connect back with other women, which eventually brought those women back to 124. Their coming first places them back before the baby's murder when "they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs' yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day" (*Beloved* 304). Not only does the TQE give Sethe an opportunity to relive that day in the wood shed, but she also gives those women an opportunity to fix what the older generations had destroyed years earlier. The first quotation represents the women leaving behind their religious ties, which could be interpreted as leaving behind patriarchal religions. Instead, TQE takes them back to "the beginning". On the one hand, this could be a dual moment connecting the women to a "preverbal language" "from the deepest roots of human knowing" (Lawrence 198). On the other hand, it could be connecting to Baby Suggs' Clearing: "the community resuscitates itself by again giving voice to the power of the life-affirming language that Baby Suggs called out in the Clearing" (Lawrence 197). The sound's ability to "knock the pods off the chestnut trees" and its water imagery symbolizes the purpose of the sound—cleansing and regrowth. To be knocked off so easily, the chestnut pods must be mature and ready to become their own trees. Once they are knocked off, they have the opportunity to plant themselves into the ground and sprout as new trees. The women with their sound have to first baptize or cleanse Sethe and then replant her into the community for the sake of her future growth. Similar to physical bodies of water, this moment of fluid sound reconnects individuals to themselves, individuals to communities, and communities to TQE.

***A Mercy*: Florens' encounter with Nature**

Streams and the Atlantic Ocean play their roles in most of the women's lives in this novel. Rebekka and Florens' mother both sailed across to the New World under different

circumstances. The ladies wash, clean their bodies, give birth, and gather pails of water from the stream, so it is a site of nurturing. In contrast, Lina, a native woman, supposedly drowns Sorrow's first baby in the stream, which means the stream also has a negative component. But, Florens' has a transformative encounter with nature that literally shows TQE presenting the duality of nature to Florens. Florens remembers a particular memory:

> In a while the path turns away from the elms and to my right is land dropping away in rocks. To my left is a hill. High, very high. Climbing over it all, up up, are scarlet flowers I never see before. . .The scent is sweet. I put my hand in to gather a few blossoms. I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag moving up the rock side. . .Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. (*A Mercy* 82)

In this memory, the perfumed scent returns, representing TQE. Since Florens' name means to blossom, the blossoming flowers could represent her. The opposite rocky side of the hill symbolizes a life without the self, and the stag on the rocks not only represents the Blacksmith but also warns Florens against her obsessive love for him. One side stands for freedom, while the other makes her freedom dependent on the stag or male figure. When Florens chooses the stag on the rocky side, it "bounds away" (*Home* 83). Florens has a choice, but she does not like the freedom because it does not involve the love of others—it only involves self-love. She chooses man over herself, but man chooses to not lose his freedom, so he runs away. This moment fails to deter Florens from her quest to only love the Blacksmith, but it does place doubt and fear into her mind: "I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (*Home* 82). Because *A Mercy* is Florens' written reflection, this could be one of the many moments where she realizes how her selflessness influenced the chain of events awaiting to happen.

***Home*: Ethel's Garden**

There are many spaces in *Home* that exude duality. For example, TQE deconstructs Frank's character by making his surrounding environment colorless until he returns to Lotus. Once he returns home, he is fully embraced by music and color, which prompts him to ask, "Had these trees always been this deep, deep green?" (*Home* 117). TQE does this not only to show him where he belongs but also to announce how this place will help him see things differently and eventually regrow. There is another dual space more prominent in the latter half of the novel. Miss Ethel, the ancestor, uses her garden as a space for nurturing and deconstruction. The Morrison Quest brings the power of women's culture to the forefront to demonstrate its influence and strength. In her archives collection at Emory University, Alice Walker includes many documents from herself and other scholars on the importance of women's culture. Susan Kirschner, a senior lecturer at Lewis and Clark College, emphasizes how society can learn from motherhood and womanly activities such as gardening. She uses a passage from Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," where Walker observes:

> I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.
>
> Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life… (Kirschner 2, Rose Library, Box 172, Folder 4)

Walker personally understands the power of writing and how it "can actually save people's lives and lead hatred and revenge in a healthier direction" (Bechdolf 8, Rose Library, Box 171, Folder 1). Notice that Walker capitalizes words such as Creator, Beauty, and Art. This is another instance where seemingly human and imperfect things are made divine. Usually, the Bible and Christian followers capitalize God, Jesus, and any pronouns associated with them because they

are sacred and powerful. While God may have the power over the world, mothers have the power to change the world because they use what nature gives them to create something vibrantly alive. Similar to how we need to listen to earth's spirit itself, we need to listen to its disciples, women and mothers, and value what Kirschner says is "women's culture, the tending of natural growth" (Kirschner 2, Rose Library, Box 172, Folder 4)[22].

In similar ways, Morrison's women and ancestors attempt to combat society's war on the true natural order (Black bodies and the environment). Miss Ethel's garden "was not Eden; it was so much more than that," and Morrison describes her garden always in constant battle with "the whole predatory world" (*Home* 130). It is important to compare the garden to Eden because, unlike Eden, Miss Ethel's garden prevents scavengers or destroyers from entering. She has complete control on what grows and how it grows. In the garden, Cee has to be healed by the sun first:

> The final stage of Cee's healing had been, for her, the worst. She was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness. (*Home* 124).

Miss Ethel characterizes this sun treatment as receiving "a permanent cure. The kind beyond human power" (*Home* 124). Her garden blocks "the whole predatory world," meaning not only animals but humans also. If the predators can be seen as human, Cee figuratively transforms into one of Ethel's plants. Unlike the predators who attempted to destroy her, the sun "embraces" Cee so that she can grow.

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[22] Some of this analysis stems from one of my seminar papers titled, "Finding Solace in Alice Walker's Gardens: Spirituality's Ability to Reform, Renew, and Reconnect the Universe."

Murray, Courtney. "Finding Solace in Alice Walker's Gardens: Spirituality's Ability to Reform, Renew, and Reconnect the Universe." 23 March 2017. Emory University. Final Seminar Paper.

In that same garden, Ethel deconstructs Cee's character by saying, "Your womb can't never bear fruit" (*Home* 128). Despite the power of the sun, Cee's damaged body cannot be completely fixed. This new realization forces Cee to ask herself, "What in this world did Cee love?" (*Home* 130). Does she love herself or how can she love herself and be a barren woman? This strength and willingness to not hide from her sadness does not go unnoticed. It encourages Frank to come to terms with his repressed emotions and memories. He observes, "his sister was gutted, infertile, but not beaten. She could know the truth, accept it, and keep on quilting" (*Home* 132). Despite her infertility, Cee begins to focus on other areas of women's culture like mending and piecing things together through her quilting. This helps her to start reconstructing herself and the people around her with Frank being the first piece in her quilt.

### ***God Help the Child*: The (Re)Appearance of The Clearing**

Bride's first encounters with true nature happens when she begins her heroine's quest to find Booker. As she drives, she imagines "forests would edge the road watching her, as trees always did," and she expects to encounter "logging camps, hamlets no older than she was, dirt roads as old as the Tribes" (*God Help the Child* 80). In her imagination and her understanding of geographic difference, she not only knows that she will be moving into a different natural space that may have a special appreciation of those natural spaces and time than her more modern lifestyle. Her personification of the trees paints them as individuals watching and waiting similar to how TQE and ancestors crouch and wait until their work is needed in the community[23]. The series in the quotation interestingly juxtaposes these watching trees. For example, the logging camps are in close proximity and contrast with the life of the trees. This could represent the danger that both parties are in. The logging camps endanger not only the environment but also

[23] Refer to chapter 2 pages 4 and 5.

aid in disconnecting humans from the ancestral presence. The second quotation shows a possible solution—the young and old existing in one space. The hamlets not separating themselves from the old dirt roads but coexisting. Bride's second encounter with trees occurs as she is still traveling: "She never saw it coming. The automobile. . .crashed into what must have been the world's first and biggest tree, which was circled by bushes hiding its lower trunk" (*God Help the Child* 82). Similar to the other texts, TQE influences the quest and announces her presence unexpectedly. How can one know its TQE affecting Bride's quest? The tree itself and how Bride perceives it exudes a sort of ancient-ness and superiority about the tree, which relates to TQE's elder status. Furthermore, smaller bushes encircle the tree. The bushes could be a figurative rendering of the ancestral network who are all connected by the central knowledge of TQE. The bushes could also be protecting the central message 'to be loved'; if trees also represent life, they surround and protect the tree of life or how all of humanity are branches of one tree, which foreshadows the return of The Clearing in this novel.

*God Help the Child* comes full circle back to *Beloved*'s use of The Clearing. There is a space in *God Help the Child* that somewhat references the redeeming space and it still has the power of the original Clearing. While Rain and Bride are discussing Rain's tumultuous past, a familiar space appears:

> A smooth ridge of rock jutted parallel to the road. Bride took Rain's hand and led her gently to the stone. They both sat down. Neither saw the doe and her fawn standing among the trees on the other side of the road. The doe watching the pair of humans was as still as the tree she stood next to. The fawn nestled her flank. (*God Help the Child* 102)

Both spaces have a rock and are surrounded by trees, but the most striking feature are the animal references. In *Beloved*, only the deer and the people/forces who cleared the spot know the origins

of The Clearing. In this instance, Morrison brings in the watching and waiting of the doe and the tree next to her—waiting to see how Bride confronts Rain's brokenness. On the way to this spot, Bride asks an important question, "You mean you don't have a home?" (*God Help the Child* 101). This could mean a physical home, but underneath it could be interpreted as Bride asking Rain about her brokenness. This question is part of a series of questions and commands used by Bride to help Rain come face-to-face with her past and her mother's actions. To begin the conversation, Bride says "Tell me" several times. This closely parallels Baby Suggs's commands for the people to dance, cry, and laugh, so Bride becomes a younger and more contemporary version of Baby Suggs. While Bride nurtures Rain, Rain's pain and memories help deconstruct Bride's current, materialistic, and disconnected figure. To show this new companionship and its influence, Morrison writes, "Rain giggled on occasion as she described her homeless life, relishing her smarts, her escapes, while Bride fought against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself" (*God Help the Child* 103). Here, the reader observes black and white, older and younger come together, despite their differences, on the basis of experience and empathy.

## "Whose house is this?": Feminine Bodies, Male Invasion, and the Unification of Male and Female

*"...the progression is really a diminishing of their abilities because of the absence of men in a nourishing way in their lives. Pilate is the apogee of all that: of the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced. That is the disability we must be on guard against for the future—the female who reproduced the female who reproduces the female." ("Rootedness" 63)*

*"The lesson of the narrative is unambiguous: There is no harmony in the human world without a harmonious relationship between man and woman. The nucleus of the real family is not mother and children, but mother, father, and children. Withdrawing into a woman-to-woman relationship only leads to disaster. A man must come and unlock the mother-child dyad, open up the circle of the pre-Oedipal bond, as is best illustrated by the merciless, deadly fight that pits Paul D against Beloved, whose narcissistic possessiveness is radically antagonistic to his own attitude." (Bonnet 51).*

These two quotations depict an unbalance that greatly affects most of the quests in Morrison's novels—the separation or unharmonious physical relationships between men and women. Both Morrison and Bonnet are concerned with the idea of purely feminine spaces—femininity breeding femininity without any interference of the masculine. What contributes to Pilate's stability and ancestral knowledge is her understanding of the balance between the

feminine and masculine. Bonnet's quotation points more toward the family unit's home space, especially how the Beloved character basically eliminates the masculine from 124. This foregrounds that Morrison uses not only natural spaces but physical spaces like houses not only to portray sites of nurturing/teaching and deconstruction/warning but also to demonstrate male invasion and its occasional product—spaces of female obsessiveness. 124 Bluestone Road is a perfect place to show the duality of physical and man-made structures.

Wardi offers an intriguing interpretation of 124 Bluestone Road's name, which emphasizes its connection to the spiritual and physical:

> Bluestone, also known as river rock, was created millions of years ago when rivers changed their course and oceans receded, leaving clams, shells, and ferns. These life forms fossilized, and the sediment turned to rock. The sediment deposits that eventually formed into bluestone originated in the transition zone between land and ocean. In *Beloved*, then, the built environment—124 Bluestone Road—situated on terra firma, continues to gesture to the river and to the liminality in which the novel traffics. . . (Wardi 67)

Morrison strategically positions 124 between the town and the stream. This in-between-ness makes it a place of transition from slavery to freedom for those in the community and Sethe and a place caught between the spiritual and physical world. At first, 124 is the community's main point of nurturing/teaching[24]; this quality really shines through when Sethe first arrives after escaping from slavery. When Sethe arrives, Baby Suggs automatically puts her quilting skills to work:

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[24] Morrison writes, "124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon" (*Beloved* 102).

> She led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. Then, while waiting for another pan of heated water, she sat next to her and stitched gray cotton. Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen. Tearing sheets, stitching the gray cotton, she supervised the woman in the bonnet who tended the baby and cried into her cooking. (*Beloved* 109)

All of Baby Suggs activities incorporate some sort of stitching and piecing together[25]. Then, there is no accident that Baby Suggs places Sethe under a quilt after each bathing. Earlier in this thesis, the quilt has been interpreted as a physical marker of TQE's growing network, so if this is so, Baby Suggs is literally and figuratively enclosing Sethe in the power of the ancestors and the elder to hold Sethe's parts together after each bathing. The woman, who Baby Suggs supervises, oddly cries into the food, but there is no sense of sadness. Buxton's book also considers the Greek use of tears in myth: "In our discussion of springs we noted a number of cases in which tears (in spite of their saltiness) were prolonged into ever-flowing sources of fresh water. But the alleged capacity of tears to generate new plant life is something different" and "In my view of Onians has convincingly shown that in ancient Greece tears could be felt to be both central to the 'stuff' of life and potent in the regeneration of that life" (Buxton 216, 217)[26]. The purpose of the tears being placed in the food and the food being ingested by Sethe is to start this process of

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[25] Sethe also demonstrates that this action is a sort of quilting at the end of the novel: "Will he do it sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (*Beloved* 321).

[26] Buxton also acknowledges the use of tears outside of Greek myth: "It is not difficult to find parallels outside Greece for a generative power ascribed to the tears of *divinities*. In ancient Egypt, human beings were said to have been born form the tears of Ra, and aromatic resins to have been generated from the tears of Horus. According to Japanese belief, when the primordial goddess Izanami died, her brother/husband Izanagi shed tears of grief, from which sprang other divinities. The tears of the Hindu god Prajapati caused the generation of the earth. In a more general sense, the shedding of tears by divinities may have the capacity to bring the dead back to life, as in the tales of Anat and Ba'al, or Isis and Osiris" (Buxton 218).

regeneration—to basically feed life back into her. 124 is also a site of male invasion and female obsessiveness, which, in contrast, aids in Sethe's deconstruction. The first instance of male invasion is Paul D's first encounter with the baby ghost. Paul D's entrance is accompanied by him "wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house" (*Beloved* 22). This is a very violent encounter between Paul D and the baby ghost. It is this roughness that not only asserts the masculinity he has not developed yet but also causes the baby to reappear in human form along with TQE with a grudge against Paul D. This encounter eventually leads to Paul D being slowly removed from the house, while TQE allows the baby ghost to completely take over. 124 becomes a female obsessive space that further isolates Sethe from Paul D and the community.

Male invasion can also be imprinted on Black bodies. Sethe's tree scar, the most studied tree in *Beloved*, is a physical showcase of (white) patriarchal invasion. One scholar, Sandy Alexandre, writes in her essay "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*" that Sethe's scar is:

> The mother of all scars, the scar to beat all battle scars. If the wounds and scars of black female trauma are supposedly unreadable because they do not surface on the discursive fleshly body, then through Sethe's all-too-visible scar, Morrison provides us with a clear directive: Register this! See this! Read this, for there is no fine print here; this is black female trauma writ large, as large as a chokecherry tree. (Alexandre 925).

Fulton also recognizes other scholars who agree that Sethe's scar is an embodiment of patriarchal invasion: "In *Toni Morrison*, Linden Peach reads Sethe's scar as the text of enslavement that her master has literally written on her body (107-8)" and "[Jean] Wyatt interprets the scar on Sethe's back as emblematic of an 'extreme of a patriarchal symbolic order'" (notes, Fulton 198)[27]. This

[27] Fulton citations:
Peach, Linden. *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1995.

invasion ties into the motivation behind Sethe's quest to Ohio. She knows her daughters will be subjected to the same patriarchal treatment[28]. All of this is an attempt at her trying to fight the white male perception that the Black female body lacks value and is animalistic.

Morrison does offer a representation of how women can combat this male invasion throughout their quest to find self. Florens' writing on the walls of her master house is a powerful statement against patriarchal invasion. Stephanie Mueller argues in her essay, "Standing up to Words: Writing and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," "[Florens'] act of carving, however, using a nail and thus by virtue of the material also a symbol of the Blacksmith's skills, transforms the room and presents an act of agency comparable to the Blacksmith's art" (Mueller 82). Florens' actions transform into not only writing herself into the framework of the white gaze but also confronts Black patriarchy and its blindness. Florens hopes that if Lina burns the mansion down, her words will spread out into the world and "flavor the soil of the earth" (*A Mercy* 188). This symbol extends the metaphor of regrowth seen throughout all the texts. Similar to the chestnut pods, maybe her words will revitalize the true natural order of the world and teach freedom of self and the harmonious benefits of men and women putting their stories side by side[29].

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Wyatt, Jean. "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Iyasere and Iyasere 231-57.

[28] In *Home*, Cee's body comes into contact with the eugenic side of white patriarchal invasion, while TQE purposefully regresses Bride's body back into a child's body in *God Help the Child*. Bride, who literally and figuratively encloses her body in white clothing and white perceptions, finds a sense of self in the white gaze. TQE makes her revisit her childhood body to not only face her childhood but also to face why she believes she is beauty just bases on white standards. Once she finds her true self, her mature feminine body returns. In *A Mercy*, Daughter Jane has to continually cut her legs to prove that she is not a witch.

[29] This is a modification of Paul D's line: "He wants to put his story next to hers" (*Beloved* 322).

**Conclusion: "Dearly Beloved:" Unifying the Individual and Community and Creating New Understandings of Home**

Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* creates a fluid home that one carries with them like a portable tent. All the relationships one creates and loses, all the people one meets become new additions to their "home" like furniture or paintings on the wall. Lorde, Morrison, and other authors explore what I call 'home mythology'. The term conveys the possibility of home being three tiered: imagined, physical, and spiritual. This new understanding of home relates is The Morrison's Quest one main goal. Home, especially for Morrison's women, has to exceed its physical limitations to become a spiritual and/or imagined connector within and between individuals and communities. Other than physical homes, home can be within the self, or it can be something shared through memory. Home mythology is a survival strategy for most of Morrison's women and even the communities that surround them. But a sense of home does not always signify a happy ending or contribute to the stability of the character; instead, it sometimes leads to their possible destruction.

In *Beloved*, Morrison desires for home to be recognized as an interconnected space[30]. On Sethe's murdered child's headstone, the "Dearly Beloved" epithet exemplifies Morrison's desire. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, in "Ten Minutes for Seven Letters: Reading *Beloved*'s Epitaph," interprets the phrase as the following:

> In the "Dearly Beloved" of the marriage ceremony and the funeral eulogy, the "beloved" unites the celebrants or mourners in a present moment of anticipation or commemoration. In its public contexts, it functions simultaneously in two capacities, marking both the

[30] In regard to literary studies, Justine Baillie, in her book *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*, states, "Morrison's notion of home is therefore diasporic, a place where race matters, but one that must be constructed beyond racialized discourse" (Baillie 163).
Baillie, Justine. *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

> specific relationship of the affianced to each other or the bereaved to the deceased, and the general relation of the Church to all. (Weinstock 132)

The epithet, being a loaded phrase, connects to the main threads of this thesis—whole individuals flourishing within whole communities. The individuals in these ceremonies—funerals and weddings—join together as two separate wholes; as a result, their respective communities also fuse together as one. The Morrison Quest, despite its focus on the Black community, illustrates the universal experience shared amongst all people. Regardless of what 'home' we desire, everyone within the human race inherently seeks a type of home or self-discovery. Understanding our interconnectedness could possibly aid in repairing prevalent brokenness in the national and global community.

This thesis primarily investigates how Toni Morrison portrays the African Diasporic Questing figure in an American and western context. In the future, I would like to expand my interests beyond the United States. Because of my coursework and current research, I want to explore how the African Diasporic Quest has transformed throughout history and in different categories of literature and scholarship (feminist studies, classical studies, British literature, Caribbean literature, etcetera) not only to demonstrate how historical contexts affect perceptions of bodily 'others' but also to emphasize the importance of understanding the interconnected human quest. For example, a smaller project could focus on William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tempest* and how those texts interact with ideas of blackness. I want to also focus on how he understands the dark figure's quest or movement. An analysis of the Caliban figure in both Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, and their historical contexts could be a starting point. My ultimate goal would be to create a collection or anthology of either critical essays or works that trace the Africana presence through these different literary

periods and genres. I will use this type of questioning to investigate each literary period and category in this way—studying how one builds the Africana quester's physical, mental, and spiritual quest and how all those texts create a dialogue concerning to the quest narrative.

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