'I Got A Tree On My Back and A Haint In My House': Names, Rebellion, and Liminal Spaces in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

In Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, she tells the story of Sethe, an escaped slave in 1870s Ohio, her daughter Denver, and Paul D, another slave who escaped from the same plantation which Sethe came from. The book centers on these characters and the introduction of Beloved, a mysterious young woman who comes to stay with them. The novel is both a dark fantasy in which the supernatural element of the ghost of Sethe’s murdered child is a central element and a neo-slave narrative which explores the psychic wounds and reverberating consequences which resulted from slavery. Morrison, a master of the craft of writing, writes about this emotionally devastating topic with grace and beauty, but also introduces the themes of rage and release, which add a depth and realism to the novel, placing the reader squarely into an uncomfortably genuine confrontation with the horrors of slavery, as well as its aftermath. In order to approach these painful topics without losing readers, in Beloved, Morrison uses multiple devices such as naming, direct resistance to convention in order to create defamiliarization, and elements of the fantastic in order to create a liminal space for her characters which allows them to address and scrutinize topics which are generally either avoided or suppressed. These techniques empower them to validate their trauma with brutal honesty and righteous anger, two behaviors which,
when discussing subjects which are painful, are generally treated as taboo by society, and, in black women such as these characters, are even more anathema.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses language to great effect in order to break readers out of the sedentary reading habits with which they are ingrained. Explaining the possibilities inherent in language, Bell Hooks writes that, “We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The Oppressed struggle in language to recover our-selves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle” (Hooks 28). Since words are capable of multiplicity of meaning, writing by members of oppressed groups can be a form of activism. One of the ways in which Morrison accomplishes this is through her use of names. The name of the main character, Sethe, means “appointed” or “placed”, indicative of Sethe’s placement as the instrument which gives voice to the rage of countless black women’s suffering under slavery. It is also a feminization of the name of Adam and Eve’s third son, implying someone outside of the binary of good, in the form of Abel, or evil, in the form of Cain. Sethe too is outside of this binary, being a fundamentally decent person who has been driven to unspeakable acts by the horrors of slavery: “And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (Morrison 193). Sethe is not crazy, she is not evil. She simply did what she could. This places her actions outside of a good/evil paradigm. Sethe is also the name of the Egyptian god of confusion, and confusion is one of the main tactics which Morrison uses throughout the novel, keeping the reader off balance in order to open them to new ways of seeing. Right from the powerful opening lines of
the novel, the reader is not certain what is real and what is metaphor: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3). Discussing how naming can function as opposition, in “These Are The Facts Of The Darky’s History: Thinking History And Reading Names In Four African American Texts”, Adam McKible writes that: “Names in… Morrison's Beloved… are crystallizations--constant reminders--of resistance and the will to freedom. These names momentarily arrest thoughts that too often go unchallenged, and shatter the confines of hegemonic historiography. They are the precious but tasteless seeds of memory and resistance” (McKible 8). This idea is evident in both Sethe’s name, which reverberates with powerful allusions, as well as in the names by which she calls her two daughters.

Sethe’s living daughter, Denver, is named after Amy Denver, the white woman who helped Sethe to deliver her. This conscious taking of a white person’s name, much as many slaves did with their masters, is an interesting choice, as it is turned on its head by the choosing of a woman’s name, and in particular a woman who saved Sethe’s life. “You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world… Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston” (Morrison 98). This act of memorialization becomes even more interesting when one realizes that the name Amy literally means “Beloved”. Given Morrison’s layered use of language, this piece of “rememory” creates an overlap of the characters of Sethe’s two daughters, Denver and Beloved, both with each other as well as with Amy Denver, in which the past and the present all exist in a repeating circle. As McKible writes, “By invoking the name Beloved, the major characters re-experience or "rememory" the past in a way that reclaims it for them” (McKible 6). By invoking the name Beloved, over and over, in multiple forms, and therefore marking them all as different and yet the same, Morrison creates a kind of collective consciousness in which black women’s shared history is both alive and present but at the same time remembered and repeated. This circle of
remembrance is reinforced even more by the direct naming of Sethe’s other daughter as Beloved. “By calling the name of a child murdered by her own mother to protect that child from slavery, the characters in Beloved unleash the past, disjoint and revise it, and unlock the promise of days to come. (7). By creating Beloved, and then identifying the concept of Beloved with multiple characters, the dead child, the ghost in the house, the girl Denver, the white woman Amy Denver, and the suddenly alive Beloved who appears at their house, Morrison creates a cycle of call and response in which each of them is individual and yet connected, allowing a connection to the past, as well as ownership of it, in a radically different way than expected; in this case, “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Morrison 253) is a potent statement about the power of “rememory”. Both the name and the character Beloved become a cipher for the mother, the daughter, the sister, and all black women everywhere, as well as those who they love and their connection to the past. This complete removal of expected boundaries creates in the reader an openness to possibility which is incredibly rare.

Morrison’s complex system of using names to generate a space in which ideas are limitless and can flow freely is bolstered by her direct opposition to novel conventions which further disorient readers, leaving them vulnerable to new ideas. For example, Morrison uses shifting points of view and a lack of formal framework to allow readers to put themselves into the story. In, “Reading Rigor Mortis: Offstage Violence And Excluded Middles ‘In’ Johnson’s ‘Middle Passage’ And Morrison’s ‘Beloved’” Vincent A. O’Keefe explains that, “The first fifteen unmarked sections of Part One of Beloved embody Morrison’s goal of creating a ‘truly aural novel’ that provides ‘many places and spaces for the readers to work and participate, to ‘fulfill’ characterizations in a ‘humanizing’ way” (O’Keefe 4). In leaving the sections unmarked, playing with points of view, and leaving things open to interpretation rather than
holding the reader’s hand and explaining everything, Morrison allows the reader to enter the text, which leads to a level of engagement and identification with the text which would be unreachable otherwise. In one particularly violent interlude, Morrison uses the tactic of switching points of view from what has so far been an all black cast of characters to putting the reader inside the head of schoolteacher, the slave master whom Sethe and Paul D. escaped from:

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four – because she’d had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one (Morrison 175-6).

The sudden shift in POV acts as a powerful tool for forcing the reader to confront concepts which they may ordinarily be resistant to, such as exactly how racism functions inside the mind of someone who believes in it: “Even more terrifying and sensational for readers… a brief but jarring shift… Morrison’s elusive narrator shocks readers with pure racist ideology stated with rational certainty in a conventionally realist technique, creating an instructive and memorable contrast in narrative epistemologies” (O’Keefe 4). This forces the reader into complicity with the white slave owner, prompting an examination of their own thoughts on the subject. The mental violence of encountering this sudden conflation of the reader and the master leaves readers reeling as they understand the depth of depravity inherent in a system of slavery, which O’Keefe describes as, “The starkness of these brief sections of ‘onstage’ narrative violence, or perceptual rigor mortis, enable readers to perceive the contrast between these sections and the ‘offstage’, repressed, and fragmented memories they encounter through the rest of Beloved” (O’Keefe 5).
addition to mental violence, readers encounter physical violence immediately and throughout

*Beloved*, reminding them of the intense trauma which slavery creates. Examples of horror abound: “The baby’s fury at having its throat cut” (Morrison 5), “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores” (6), slaves “fucking cows, dreaming of rape” (11), bosses on the work gang forcing the slaves to perform oral sex on them (127). By keeping the reader off-balance, removing the safety nets of convention, and then confronting them with these vivid images of brutality and depravity, Morrison inflicts a mental trauma in the reader which induces a throb of sympathy for the victims of slavery, whose lives were a constant stream of unpredictability, trauma, and lack of agency on a scale which is unimaginable.

In order to keep the novel both dynamic and unsettled, contradicting the idea that narratives must move toward closure, in *Beloved*, Morrison instead creates an ending which, according to Martha J. Cutter in “The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz*”, keeps, “meaning in motion, to keep the story going on and on in the reader’s mind and heart” (Cutter 61). One of the ways in which Morrison does this is the use of the fantastic, in the form of the character Beloved. Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as,

> A literary genre that makes uncertainty on the part of its readers the very core of rhetorical and thematic strategies. More specifically, the reader must hesitate between two narrative explanations for unusual events: either they can be explained by realistic reasons… or they can be explained my marvelous ones. When a reader hesitates between marvelous and realistic causes for unusual events, s/he is in the realm of the fantastic (Todorov).
The character of Beloved certainly fits this description. On the one hand, the reader is tempted to classify her as supernatural, since her similarities to Sethe’s dead child and certain events seem to point in that direction. For example, Beloved asks questions she shouldn’t know to ask, such as “Where your diamonds?” (Morrison 69) and appears to choke Sethe psychically: “Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled” (113). On the other hand, different, more concrete explanations are also offered about Beloved’s origins: “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her” (277). This ambiguity leaves the answer to these questions, and many more, unresolved, never quite allowing the reader to make up their mind. Perhaps this is the point, and Morrison uses the fantastic in order to explode the preconceived barriers which readers bring to a text, and which may keep them from thinking too deeply about uncomfortable subjects. In Cutter’s words: “At the end of a fantastic text the confluence between reader’s and character’s points of view self-destructs, forcing the reader to read metatextually, searching for the mechanisms whereby this identification was created and the ambiguous world of the fantastic was maintained” (Cutter 63). Because of this, Beloved creates an open-ended and unstable narrative, remaining in the readers’ mind long after the book has been put down, and leaves reverberations of a new rhythm that is spun from both familiar and unfamiliar patterns: “certain formal and textural features of narration are interwoven with an oral African American aesthetic agenda to create a work that is, in both its lexical and aural features, infinite, plural, and open” (63). Is Beloved real? Is she a ghost? The reader is uncertain, shifting between one viewpoint and the other, and never fully reaching a place of conviction. If, as Todorov writes, “A fixed law, an established rule, that is what immobilizes narrative” (Todorov 165) then Beloved is the antithesis of that. The ambiguity of Beloved’s nature, as well as the uncertainty which the reader feels both
during and after reading the novel is the mechanism by which Morrison creates instability and therefore defamiliarization, thereby forcing the reader into contemplation and confrontation which would otherwise be at best resisted, and at worst impossible. This volatility, combined with the resistance of the unconventional form, and the violence imprinted on the readers’ psyche all serve to open the door for a generally forbidden voicing of both pain and fury. The character of Beloved can be seen in multiple ways, but the possibility for her to act as a metaphor for Sethe’s rage at the myriad of psychic wounds which slavery has left her with is one of the most valuable, in a world which simply does not acknowledge or allow for the possibility of a black woman’s righteous anger or rebellion.

All of these techniques create liminal spaces in which the characters of Beloved are finally able to give voice to their rage and in doing so, act in rebellion against the societal structures which have not only created their pain, but also sought to silence them. As Amanda Putnam points out in, “Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Beloved, and Mercy*” because of her dire circumstances, Sethe is forced to act in a way which directly contravenes societal expectations of her: “Many of Morrison’s female characters turn to violence… and, in doing so, attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. This process demonstrates the ways in which violence itself can become an act of rebellion, a form of resistance to oppressive power” (Putnam 25). When Paul D asks, “Tell me this one thing… How much is a nigger supposed to take?” (Morrison 277) Stamp Paid replies, “All he can”. In *Beloved*, Sethe has clearly taken all she can, and she refuses to take anymore. She even says so outright: “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth” (18). So Sethe’s actions in attempting to kill her
children to keep them out of slavery become a sort of, “disruption of the multifaceted oppression… suffered within a white patriarchal society where black women are tormented and subjugated by social and racial domination, exclusion and rejection” (Putnam 25-6). This rebellion creates a new paradigm, thereby allowing Sethe to create a new system in which she has some sort of power; in this new framework, “black women are not powerless or without options; instead, they can create new patterns and refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them (26). This is a way of giving voice to their rage and doing it honestly, and not requiring anyone’s permission to do so. This creates a final act of rebellion: “By choosing death for their children, these mothers are demonstrating the ways in which fatal violence becomes an act of rebellion and a form of resistance” (37).

Liminality is a state of ambiguity or confusion that occurs between two circumstances, when something stands at the verge of differing possible ways of existing. This concept may the biggest theme in *Beloved*, as the whole book functions as a sort of liminal space, standing on the threshold of convention and resistance, between the supernatural and the real, and in the center of a battlefield of pain, rage, and suppression which surrounds the unhealed wound which slavery left on history. By using names with powerful meanings, breaking down the conventions of the novel, ambiguous language, disorientation and fantastical elements, Toni Morrison conjures up liminal spaces in which her black female characters can finally give voice to the agony and wrath which the institution of slavery has left on them and their descendants. Morrison’s deft manipulation of the readers’ preconceived notions and removal of their psychic safety net creates fertile ground for planting the seeds of empathy and openness, thereby allowing a conversation which is long overdue to take place.
Works Cited


