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Reuniting Identities: Fragmentation of the Mind in *Beloved* and *Ceremony*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* present protagonists whose lives are shaped by racial oppression and traumatic experiences. In *Beloved*, many characters are former slaves and keep themselves from fulfilling their lives' dreams because they are captivated by a past from which they must shield themselves. Similarly, in *Ceremony*, characters have frayed identities because of cultural oppression and traumatic war experiences. Racial oppression factors into the sense of self of those oppressed and unites experiences between diasporas. Trauma surrounding distressing experiences pushes Sethe from *Beloved* and Tayo from *Ceremony* to repress their traumatic pasts and forego the difficult process of recovery. In the novels *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, main characters Sethe and Tayo both become mentally fragmented in their pursuits of the fantastic to alienate themselves from their traumatic lives and discrimination, an element Morrison and Silko use to acknowledge the American ignorance of racial oppression.

One of the main characters of *Beloved*, Sethe, is one of the best examples of fragmentation of the mind in the novel. As a former slave and someone who experienced numerous cases of assault, Sethe is surrounded by trauma, which impacts her life goals. She struggles to be a caring mother to her children, having seen so many other families torn apart by slavery. She learns to "love small" and protect her children from the horrors she faced (Morrison 191; 194). Because of the distrust caused by slavery and her emotionally absent mother, evidenced by Sethe only seeing her "a few times out in the fields (Morrison 72), Sethe's identity deviates from her intentions of being a protective, emotionally invested mother. According to

Schreiber, “Slave parents learn to not get too emotionally attached so as to minimize their feelings of loss...As a result of the destruction of the family unit, masters, overseers, sheriffs, and other white officials function as maltreating parents, creating physical and mental trauma for blacks in the slave system” (36). Sethe blocks out many of her feelings when speaking to her daughter Denver, which Beloved’s presence encourages. Denver first sees herself as a protector for Beloved, but Beloved and Sethe eventually cut her out of their games once Sethe sees the under-the-chin scar that indicates Beloved is her long-lost child (Morrison 281-282). Sethe is forced to confront the memory of the Schoolteacher through Beloved. To make reparations for murdering her own child, Sethe obsesses over making Beloved happy, while ignoring her motherly duties toward Denver.

In Ceremony, main character Tayo feels alienation from his physical self and disassociation from his own thoughts. Silko illustrates this disassociation at the start of the novel, with Tayo referring to himself in the third person: “and one day Tayo heard a voice answering the doctor. The voice was saying, ‘He can’t talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound’” (14). By referring to himself as a separate person, Tayo attempts to distance himself from his traumatic experiences in war. He has many identities that make up a fragmented persona. He was a soldier in WWII, he has his childhood experiences, he is part Laguna, he is part white, and he has family roles as a son, brother, and cousin. From hallucinating his Uncle Josiah in line with Japanese soldiers whom his troop killed, to hearing of his brother (or cousin, by blood) Rocky’s death in a P.O.W. camp, Tayo struggles to cope with his trauma and distances his psychological self from his physical self. When mourning Rocky, Tayo thought, “It was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was still unburied” (Silko 26). Tayo also faces oppression from his

community for being part white, which elicits an internal self-hatred that he must overcome to be psychologically whole. According to French psychologist Pierre Janet, “[Normal memory,] like all psychological phenomena, is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story” (qtd. in Satterlee 77). Tayo’s memory is a broken story almost unable to be pieced together in fear Tayo will relive too many traumatic moments in the process.

Forced remembrance surrounds the slavery-inflicted trauma narrative in *Beloved*. Sethe represses her memories until Paul D’s arrival, when she’s faced with the first forgotten piece of her past. Sethe realizes her love for Paul D, and it reawakens her love for Denver, whom she emotionally abandoned. Sethe’s newfound love and grief are experienced through Beloved’s ghost (Shilaja 31). Beloved’s connection to the enslaved community also draws Sethe to her. Sethe uses Beloved as an escape from working through her trauma, making the fantastic exist as a deviator from reality for Sethe. Scenes like the carnival serve as cathartic moments where Sethe can fully escape from her worries. Although the carnival scene was right before Beloved became part of the characters’ lives, the pure joy felt by the characters exemplifies the notion that the fantastic can transcend reality in fun and games for a moment (Morrison 56-59). Beloved’s immediate discovery puts a damper on the family’s fun, but the catharsis before meeting her implies that Beloved’s presence serves as emotional release. When Sethe comes across Beloved, she feels an urge to urinate so intense she hasn’t felt one like it since childhood (Morrison 61). Sethe connects immediately to Beloved, since Beloved emerged from the water, and must also seek relief by purging herself of the same water (in the form of urine). Since Paul D’s reemergence into Sethe’s life, this is the first step Sethe faces to acknowledge her past, which will lead her to overcome her trauma.

Forced remembrance also surrounds Tayo as a war veteran with severe issues with post-traumatic stress disorder. Tayo struggles with identity and the alienation of his spiritual self from his physical self, experiencing frequent bouts of depression and combatting them by trying to forget what he experienced while at war. However, when facing the medicine man, Ku'oosh, Tayo is forced to remember his traumatic past. "It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web" (Silko 35), and Tayo is reminded of his previous struggles. At the start of the novel, Tayo's efforts to work through his trauma through forced remembrance are outlined when Silko writes, "He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present...things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more" (6). Tayo's PTSD makes his thoughts often uncontrollable, and forced remembrance is what begins to unravel his tangled memories. According to Avila, "It is a sacrifice of self and complete surrender to vulnerability that allow healing to take place in Tayo's life and combat the witchery in his community" (53). Once he opens himself to his past to remember his trauma and acknowledges the split between spirituality and physical being, Tayo begins the recovery process. Tayo's mixed race also establishes his split identity. He's made fun of, especially by Emo, and resented by his family for being part white. He speaks to his friends of the white men erasing the Indigenous people's feeling that they are part of America once the war ended: "They blamed themselves for losing the new feeling...They never saw that it was the white people who gave them that feeling and it was white people who took it away again when the war was over" (Silko 39). Tayo knows he cannot fully understand the feeling of his culture being forgotten after their work in the war is over, but he tries his best to convey it to his other non-white friends. His "half-breed" status, however,

makes him internalize the blame for his removed sense of Americanness, which couples with his sense of self-hatred for not being a full-blood Laguna.

The fantastic plays a major role in *Beloved* and *Ceremony* as a way for characters to break free from reality. In *Beloved*, the fantastic exists through Beloved, an entity with unknown origins who may be the return of Sethe's "already crawling?" child. Sethe's fascination with Beloved and desire to make her happy despite dark moments are outlets that allow her to break free from the reality of her difficult job and taking care of her youngest child, Denver. In *Ceremony*, the fantastic elevates the story and allows for assumptions that elements have god-like features, such as Tayo believing his mental status and repression of memories made the drought happen (Silko 42), along with the existence of the medicine man and Ts'ch as sacred figures who lead Tayo further into his journey. In *Beloved*, Morrison establishes Beloved as a fantastic being at her introduction. She is a looming spirit in the house before emerging as a physical being, mirroring Sethe's repressed — but still existing — emotional trauma. Beloved's entry into Sethe's life as a fantastic being and Tayo's completion of the ceremony grant Sethe and Tayo the chance to use elements of the unknown to face their repressed memories and merge their identities into one.

In letting Sethe and Tayo escape reality, the fantastic also allows them to transcend trauma through escape. The fantastic grants the characters an avenue to become complete; its otherworldly features, whether subtle or not, give Sethe and Tayo the chance to overcome their trauma through remembrance. The collective unconscious breathes the fantastic into *Beloved*, with Beloved being the agent for the shared minds of former and present slaves. This collective unconscious exists through the shared experiences of slaves in a Middle Passage-based experience for Beloved. She enters the realm of the unconscious and experiences the memories

of her enslaved ancestors; “we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it it is hard to make yourself die forever you sleep short and then return” (Morrison 248-249). By placing *Beloved* as part of this Middle Passage, where all people are unsure whether they can die or remain dead until coming back to life, Morrison directly relates *Beloved*'s experiences to those of former slaves. The fantastic puts collective trauma from slavery into conversation with overcoming repressed memories through *Beloved*'s experiences, allowing readers to feel for the immense trauma faced by the enslaved.

In *Ceremony*, the fantastic grants Tayo the chance to overcome his traumatic past and racial oppression to become a healer for his community. Much like Sethe in *Beloved*, Tayo uses community to incite “rememory” to discover his sense of self and merge spiritual with physical once again. Tayo's remembrance comes through storytelling, which is a deep subject in the novel, as Indigenous culture is passed down through stories, along with connections to nature. Tayo remembers many of the stories told to him and remembers his own experiences, leading to his mental recovery. The smoke and clay analogy from the start of the text returns near the end, with emphasis on the importance of memory: “‘The clay is washing away,’ she said. ‘Nobody has come to paint it since the way. But as long as you remember what you have seen, then nothing is gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together’” (Silko 215). Tayo's remembrance of his traumatic moments bring him closer to rebirth. The fantastic also exists in connections to nature, the drought ending and the weather improving once Tayo enters the recovery process (Silko 204-205). The fantastic elements of the story, such as Tayo's notion that he's the reason from the drought and all of the storm clouds being locked away (Silko 160), elevate Tayo to a god-like level. To free the stormclouds, the Sun Man guessed what Kaup'a'ta had in his bag by betting everything he had (Silko 162-163), much like the emotional

vulnerability Tayo had to subject himself to in order to become psychologically whole. The cyclical nature of the novel mirrors Tayo's traumatic experiences and overemphasis of certain memories, making it a work based in magical realism (time doesn't pass normally) that shows Tayo becoming an individual through his inherent connection with the fantastic.

The characters seek mental wholeness, and at points their fragmented identities come together through trauma transcendence. Tayo finds solace in his race when he's told by the Night Swan that being part white does not make him less Laguna. She says, "[People] are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves" (Silko 92). He comes to terms with himself and is able to help his community once he understands the factors that make up his combined — not fragmented — identity. "Initially, trauma alienates the protagonist, but later it provides an avenue for Tayo to occupy a privileged role in the Laguna community as a healer and 'messenger' between different ethnic groups in an ailing modern America" (Satterlee 73). Tayo's pursuit of the fantastic is a successful one, as he sees the issues in his community and seeks to heal them, elevating him above his previously separate identity. However, even after the ceremony, Tayo still experiences doubt concerning his race and his mental illness. He understands why he felt sick and doubted Ts'eh's love and the ceremony: "this was their place, and he was vulnerable" (Silko 225). Tayo's journey to mental wholeness is met with self-doubt, considering he's faced much trauma in his life, but he experiences a spiritual "rebirth" at the end of the novel, foreshadowed by the mention of Tayo as invisible, "white smoke," which "had been dense; visions of and memories of the past did not penetrate there" (Silko 13-14). Tayo starts as smoke, but moves toward rebirth, where he becomes more than himself as a healer for his community once the ceremony is over. He takes on the responsibility of taking care of nature and "makes peace with his demons, becoming

whole again in body, mind, and spirit” after witnessing the destroyers (Avila 55). Tayo discovers his identity and uses the reemergence of his mental status to transition into a fantastic figure.

Sethe’s efforts to achieve mental wholeness are awakened through Paul D and then reinforced through the help of the community. Once Denver realizes that Beloved’s love for Sethe has gone too far, she seeks the support of the community, and they come to pray to remove Beloved’s spirit from Sethe, thus reuniting their family. By overcoming Beloved’s possession, Sethe and Denver finally become self-reliant and formulate their own identities (Shilaja 32). Sethe runs to the community and breaks from Beloved, leaving her alone for the “hill of black people” (Morrison 309), the opposite of Beloved escaping that “hill” when leaving the Middle Passage scene. Sethe finally completes her endeavor into identity when Beloved leaves — having processed her trauma and recognized it as part of her. According to Shilaja, “On the individual level, gaining collective freedom called for re-memorizing ancestral heritage sharing stories...For Morrison, it is the African American community that helps in the reclamation of the identity” (33). For Sethe, entering the community gathered at her house and seeking to attack the white man with an ice pick in her hand are the opposites of her original denial of traumatic experiences. Sethe remembers what she’s overcome with the help of the community and from sharing her own memories with Beloved and Denver. In remembering through storytelling, “this community sharing — through rememory or through the confrontation of trauma through personal and communal memory — restores the shattered family network” (Schreiber 43). Sethe becomes one with others while understanding her own identity once she’s spoken about her experiences, and Beloved disappears, no longer having the ability to control Sethe.

To acknowledge the American ignorance of racial oppression, authors Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko use fragmentation of the minds of their main characters, Sethe and Tayo,

who lose their senses of identity in their pursuits of the fantastic, to repress their traumatic pasts. Both characters internalize their distressing experiences to avoid reliving them, but once they encounter the fantastic, they move toward trauma transcendence. Sethe becomes one with herself through nurturing Beloved, and once she breaks free from her, she can join the Black community as herself again. Tayo completes a decades-long ceremony and uplifts himself into a community healer role, breaking free from isolating individuality. Although the characters also overcome trauma through the help of supporting characters, the fantastic provides them an outlet to better understand their identities through facing their repressed selves and moving toward nurturing roles in their family situations and communities.

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