Nicole Smith

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Profs. Wright & Llobera

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The Daughters of Sweet Home:
Generational Impacts on Narrative Inheritance in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores topics ranging from the horrors of slavery to the equally violent love of a mother. At its core, however, *Beloved* is an exploration of memory. The namesake character herself is memory personified, the coalition of both an individual's memories and the collective trauma of a community. Beloved's introduction to the house at 124 is turbulent—she derives pleasure from her mother's storytelling as much as her sister, but the effects of narrative transmission between Beloved and Sethe differ widely from those between Denver and Sethe. This paper will examine and then explain the contrast between Sethe's daughters, in light of the relationship between memory, time, and narrative transmission, drawing theoretical support from the fields of philosophy and narrative medicine. In order to do so, we must first take a theoretical look at the relationship between memory and narrative, and consequently how that intersection is explored in the novel.

I would propose that because the process through which memories are formed and accessed is inherently narrative, memories themselves—as well as their transmission *through* narrative—are, like any narrative, subject to temporal implications. In *Beloved,* these temporal implications are elucidated by boundaries of generation complicated by the fantastical introduction of the child ghost; within the house at 124, there are three distinct generations: those who survived slavery (Sethe, Paul D), those who did not (Beloved), and those who have never experienced it (Denver). (It is worth noting preemptively that Beloved's generational placement

is due in part to her collective memory of generations coming before her.) A close reading of the dynamics of these three generations within a single household elucidates the fact that even when individuals are separated by a small number of years, they can still be subject to generational boundaries that have profound implications not only on the way they can inherit narratives, but *also* the impact of narrating on their predecessors. This is why Beloved's reception of Sethe's narrative almost destroys Sethe, while Denver's reception of it saves their family.

Primarily, it is necessary to understand the relationship between memory and narrative, and subsequently, time. The involvement of narrative in memory processes is the connective tissue that allows us to look at narrative and memory as inseparable and inheritable, both requiring temporal bounds and being affected by temporal distortions (a subcategory of which is generational boundaries). For a theoretical framework by which we can elucidate this relationship, I turn to *Events, Narratives, and Memory* by Nazim Keven. In this article, Keven explores foundational assumptions across philosophy and psychology, fields that delineate between 'event memory' and 'episodic memory' (though both have gone by alternate names since Aristotle). While event memory is concerned with short-term and perceptual processing, episodic memory involves the creation of longer-lasting records of events bound into narrative (Keven 2498). Keven calls this process *narrative binding*, a process that involves linking events across time, establishing causal relationships, and ascribing goal hierarchies to create focal points in memory reconstruction and representation (Keven 2504-5). Evidently in this model, the ability to construct intertemporal relationships and subjective goal-orientation is the foundation upon which memories themselves are created, processed, and received.

Pointing to theory alone, however, is not enough. To demonstrate that Keven's framework and the general assumptions surrounding the creation and functioning of memory

across disciplines are applicable to Morrison's text, I would like to examine the story Sethe tells of her escape from Sweet Home as a proof of concept. While narrating her escape first to Paul D, Sethe says:

> "'Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it…I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from… The milk would be there and I would be there with it'" (Morrison 19).

In this excerpt, we can see Sethe following the steps of narrative binding almost to the letter. Her narration of her memories pull from and integrate past, present, and future; establish causal relationships; and orient around a central goal: getting milk to her child. The integration of timelines (herself as she looks and smells in the present, what she told the women in the wagon, and what she'll do when she's reunited with her baby) as well as the causal relationships between these events (i.e., her absence leading to a lack of proper nursing for her child) are all centered around her milk itself. In fact, this goal orientation is so strong that it actually acts as a sort of identity: milk is how she understands her appearance and even her smell, and the delivery of milk comes before the arrival of the mother in the last sentence of the excerpt, highlighting the power of the goal orientation in this narrative process.

The demonstration of narrative binding of memory is not just limited to Morrison's protagonist. Later, Amy explains her destination to Sethe:

"*Boston*. Get me some velvet. It's a store there called Wilson. I seen the pictures of it and they have the prettiest velvet. They don't believe I'm a get it, but I am" (Morrison 40, emphasis added) and then "You better tell her. You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of *Boston*" (Morrison 83, emphasis added).

Like Sethe did previously, Amy is constructing memories across temporal strands: she *saw* a picture of the store, she *is* Miss Amy Denver of Boston, she *is going to* acquire the velvet. Her goal-orientation around acquiring velvet conflates with the most externalized expression of her present identity: her name; thus, by achieving the goal around which her narrative is centered, she will change her identity itself. Consequently, we have multiple examples of Keven's model paralleled in Morrison's text: the process by which memories are created and related is inherently narrative, meaning it must be temporal and affected by temporal distortion.

Now that Keven's framework has been validated against Morrison's text, I want to turn to a subset of temporal boundaries that affects the transmission of memories between individuals: generational delineations. The idea that transmission of narratives between generations approximates a kind of memory is well-documented in the literature of narrative medicine. In *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust,* Marianne Hirsch outlines "absent memory, inherited memory, belated memory, prosthetic memory, vicarious witnessing, received history, and [her own term] postmemory" as ways to describe this type of transmission. Importantly, however, she stresses that what all these definitions hold in common is that this specialized type of 'memory'—that which is inherited across generational lines—is different from the memory of an individual who actually experienced the original event (Hirsch 105-6). The agreement of scholars on the uniqueness of this type of inheritance provides a foundation upon which I would like to build, exploring how complex intergenerational dynamics actually affect the transmission itself. This essay will provide a text-based examination not on the object of the generationally-inherited memory, but the process of the inheritance itself. I take no issue with any of the terms outlined above, but for the purposes of this essay, in light of

the focus on memory, time, and narrative, I will be referring to histories related between characters in *Beloved* as 'memory-narratives.' This combination is particularly helpful in the case of *Beloved* as all the stories that are told between characters are also memories. I will call the process by which these memories are given and received across generational boundaries 'narrative inheritance.'

To understand the impacts of intergenerational dynamics on narrative inheritance, I would next like to delineate the importance of the audience in a successful narrative inheritance process. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* Dori Laub discusses at length the critical importance of an audience to the preservation of the memory-narrative. In discussing a Holocaust survivor's inability to heal from her trauma, Laub explains that this survivor's story

> "could never be told in a way she chose to tell it… because there could not be an audience (even in her family) that was generous, sensitive, and self-effacing enough to obliterate its own existence… [leading] to an unavoidable dead-end, in which the fight against the obliteration of the story could only be at the cost of the obliteration of the audience" (Laub 78-9).

What Laub is suggesting here is that a necessary distance must exist between the narrator and the audience to maintain the integrity of both actors. The audience must not impose too highly on the narrative, else they become locked in a struggle of survival that requires the destruction of the identity of teller or receiver. And this is exactly what happens in Morrison's *Beloved:* Beloved's hunger for the story—her imposition upon it—means that either she (the audience) or Sethe (the narrator) must be destroyed as a result of the attempted inheritance. However, Morrison's novel deviates from Laub's theorizing in a critical way: Beloved is not the only audience for Sethe's story. In Laub's writing, the Holocaust was an event without a contemporary audience. What,

then, happens when a narrative has *multiple* audiences, each of varying receptive capacities? This is the central question that Morrison addresses through the differing dynamics between Paul D, Denver, and Beloved as audiences for Sethe's memory-narrative.

The differentiation between Paul D, Beloved, and Denver as audiences for Sethe's memory-narrative—generational in nature as it is—is critical in understanding why the outcomes of narrative inheritance of the same story across two sisters are so radically different. Primarily, I want to justify my choice to focus this essay on the two sisters rather than all three receivers. The most evident justification is that while Paul D *is* an audience for Sethe's memory-narratives, he does not inherit it. This is because, unlike Denver and Beloved, Paul D is of Sethe's same 'narrative' generation. Morrison practically states this outright multiple times in the novel: "[Sethe's] story was bearable because it was [Paul D's] as well" (Morrison 116) and "[Paul D] wants to put his story *next* to [Sethe's]" (Morrison 273, emphasis added). The equal possession of the story in the first excerpt and the use of 'next to' in the second denies any suggestion of hierarchical transmission, neatly eliminating the possibility of narrative inheritance in this dynamic and the relevance of Paul D to the scope of this essay.

Thus, Beloved and Denver are the only two characters capable of narratively inheriting Sethe's stories—leading the reader to ask what kind of distance suggested by Laub actually differentiates them. The answer is again a delineation of generation: this is the mechanism informing the capacities of each sister as receivers of narrative inheritance, as well as the consequences of their modes of reception for Sethe. Though the sisters are separated by less than two years temporally, the distortion of time along generational boundaries means that Beloved is functionally of a different generation than her sister. This differentiation occurs when Sethe recognizes Beloved as the ghost of her daughter and, importantly, simultaneously excludes

Denver from a previously collective narrative inheritance process: “But once Sethe had seen the scar… the two of them cut Denver out of the games” (Morrison 281-2). Once recognized by her mother, Beloved is no longer a part of Denver’s generation, which had known only stories of slavery. But nor was Beloved part of their mother’s generation: she has experienced slavery, but not survived it. And yet, she is still present for her narrative inheritance. Morrison’s willingness to engage the fantastical in this way consequently presents a situation that pushes theory to its limit. Beloved is generationally adrift, and this has dire consequences for the process of narrative inheritance.

After Sethe recognizes Beloved, their relationship takes on a parasitic nature. Denver agonizes over which woman to protect from the other. Here we see the text following the framework outlined by Laub: either the dysfunctional audience (Beloved) or the memory-narrative itself (and consequently Sethe’s identity) must be destroyed. Successful narrative inheritance is impossible for Beloved due to her inability to process the narratively-bound stories she is receiving. “You forgetting how little [the ghost] is,” Sethe tells Denver in the early pages of the novel, “She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even” (Morrison 5). As a consequence of her generational displacement, Beloved never grew up. According to a study cited by Keven, this phenomenon is known in psychology as ‘childhood amnesia,’ and describes the limitations of younger children in reconstructing memories with narrative coherence. Keven suggests this is due to their inability to engage in the narrative binding process, and Morrison’s text seems to agree (Keven 2504-5). And once the generational barrier between Sethe and Beloved collapses—destroying with it the necessary distance between narrator and audience described by Laub—Denver witnesses Sethe “try to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had

done was right because it came from true love" (Morrison 296). Sethe, a character who has never once expressed regret for her actions, is now being asked to justify her narrative—and by extension, her identity.

Next, I want to look at Denver's contrasting positioning as an inheritor of Sethe's memory-narrative. While the generational boundary between Sethe and Beloved is broken down over the course of the narrative, the boundary between Sethe and Denver is actually reinforced by multiple actors. Sethe herself admits that the job of "keeping Denver from the past… was all that mattered" (Morrison 51). Paul D also plays a role in maintaining this boundary. Upon his arrival, he and Sethe discussed Halle and Sweet Home, and

> "Denver sat down on the bottom step. There was nowhere else gracefully to go. They were a twosome, saying 'Your daddy' and 'Sweet Home' in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father's absence was not hers… Just as only those who lived in Sweet Home could remember it, whisper and glance sideways at one another while they did" (Morrison 15).

Denver has no possession over this story, and Sethe feels no obligation to justify anything to her. The same is true of Sethe's relation of her escape from Sweet Home later in the novel—though she was pregnant with Denver, the goal orientation of her narrative is about getting to Beloved: "What I had to get through later I got through because of [Beloved]" (Morrison 233). Although Denver chafes at her exclusion in the initial stages of the novel, her distance from the narrative actually protects her and allows her to be a functional receiver for her mother's memory-narrative. And her successful narrative inheritance is in turn what allows her to protect her mother, rather than destroy her. When Sethe's confusion of past and present causes her to attack Mr. Bodwin, Denver understands her mother in context and is "'the first one [wrestling] her mother down. Before anybody knew what the devil was going on'" (Morrison 213). In this

excerpt, Denver is performing as what Hirsch might call a receptive post generation: she is carrying her mother's story forward without appropriating it, without unduly calling attention to herself, but also without allowing her own story to be displaced by a reflexive reenactment of her mother's traumatic past (Hirsch 104, my own analysis added). In doing so, she protects not only her mother's legacy, but also their collective future.

Looking at the relationship between memory, time, and narrative provides a foundation upon which to examine the complex storytelling dynamics between Morrison's central characters in *Beloved.* Theories of inherited memory across generational gaps drawn from narrative medicine allow clarification and classification of these characters into different generations that then inform the way they are—or are not—able to inherit memory-narratives from prior generations. Combined, these two frameworks from philosophy and narrative medicine provide a model onto which both Sethe and her two daughters can be mapped, and from there, close-reading of Morrison's text reveals that the generational framework and its limitations are actually what inform the behaviors and relationships between Sethe and her two daughters. Only when Morrison's text is applied to the memory-narrative model can we finally understand the differences between Denver and Beloved, despite the minimal years between them, and how that difference plays out for both the narrators and the receivers in the critical process of narrative inheritance.

In *Beloved,* Morrison uses elements of fantasy—a child ghost reincarnated into a being of collective memory and narrative illiteracy—to push existing theories of memory inheritance to their limit. She teaches the reader that though two girls may be sisters separated by only a few years, the way they move within and interact with the memories they inherit is vastly different, having opposite outcomes for both themselves and their mother. Thus, Morrison asks us to look

more closely at how we construct generational divisions, and how we understand those individuals who fall outside of the traditional breaks. Her work reimagines a lost generation and its reintegration for society, a process that is as necessary as it is perilous. Only by understanding and cultivating narrative receptivity in generations to come can we protect the precious process of narrative inheritance and allow ourselves to imagine a future uncondemned to repeat the mistakes of our past.

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Final Reflection

I came into this course without any established expectations about what the intersection between narrative and medicine would look like in practice. My biggest takeaway in terms of course material is that I feel this course has exposed me to content that I not only really enjoyed, but believe is vital as a scholar of medicine and humanity. I especially appreciated the re-examination of texts that I had previously read under a narrative medicine lens, as I felt like I was able to really gain a more nuanced understanding of these pieces—especially *Beloved.*

As someone who comes from a writing and theoretical background, I enjoyed the integration of theory into the coursework, and especially into the final assignment above. In terms of feedback from prior written assignments, I came into the program and remain confident in my close-reading skills, but I do think I have some remaining work to do in terms of working on integrating close-reading with theory. Since receiving feedback on my close-reading assignments, and especially in this final assignment, I've really tried to work on better structural integration of close-reading, most notably in constructing logical transition sentences that don't disrupt the reader's logical flow.

I think the largest area of growth for me going forward is still in the practical application of narrative medicine theory. The initial facilitation was definitely out of my comfort zone, and I think facilitating will be a skill for me to develop, particularly in anticipation of MDED 502 next semester. Since that assignment, I've been thinking about how to structure questions that reflect my theoretical and critical understanding of the material, but also in a way that is most beneficial

to the workshop group—and without projecting what I believe to be ‘answers’ onto the questions themselves.

Additionally, I have a couple areas of excitement moving forward. Most notably, I’m very excited about my capstone, which is about exploring the narrative mechanisms of fantasy and how they relate to topics in narrative medicine. (I’m thinking that I’m going to end up somewhere in the realm of how fantasy deals with narrative therapeutics, but the research is yet to tell.)

My next area of excitement is actually on the topic of my final paper. I spent a lot of time thinking conceptually about how to reconcile the events of *Beloved* with existing theories in narrative medicine, and ultimately arrived at my core idea of narrative inheritance. In light of conversations we had in the last class, I’m definitely thinking about refining this concept going forward. I’m not sure if I’ll have the opportunity to work on it further in future classes, or if this is something that I should try to pursue through directed study. Regardless, I’m interested to see how the concept of narrative inheritance might be applicable to future texts, and how it might be supported and further defined to stand on its own as a theoretical concept in narrative medicine. I’m definitely open to suggestions or guidance on how best to pursue this topic further.

In terms of the final project itself, I really enjoyed getting to work on *Beloved* again. I went into this paper concerned with the limited amount of space and unsure how I was going to wrangle all of my topics into a single, relatively cohesive argument. And while it’s true that I had more topics I would have loved to discuss (i.e., the differences between Morrison’s rememory and Hirsch’s postmemory), I’m proud of the conceptual work that I put into this assignment—and I was pleasantly surprised that the topical cuts I made to my outline ended up producing a paper that fit the length requirement near-perfectly.

This final assignment is one of the shorter papers I've written since my upper division classes at UCLA, but I think the shorter length requirement really forced me to refine my arguments and recognize what was and wasn't essential to the communication of my thesis. I'm hoping that a clear-cut initial understanding of the topic of narrative inheritance will serve as a good foundation for any exploration I do going forward.

To conclude this reflection, I mostly just want to say that I've really enjoyed this class. I feel like we've gotten through so much content this semester, and though I do wish we'd had more time on some subjects—especially the novel-length readings—I've thoroughly enjoyed this introduction to narrative medicine and its topics. This semester was a huge challenge for me, in terms of starting a new job that is creatively and analytically demanding in addition to going through graduate school for the first time—not to mention the logistical difficulties of getting northeast of downtown while in the middle of a workday twice a week—but I'm really proud of myself for putting my all into this program.

This first semester has really expanded the way I look at the world, and enhanced my ability to understand people in context everywhere in my life—not just healthcare settings. I've also really enjoyed looking at theory in a capacity that transcends literature alone, which always felt out of place in my undergraduate pursuits, but now feels not only valuable, but essential. I've missed school a lot since undergraduate, and the narrative medicine program has not only allowed me to return to an academic setting, but also to finally pursue topics that I never had the chance to focus on during my undergraduate career. I'm so grateful to be a part of this program, and though my current career has less application for the healthcare elements, I'm really excited to see where further academic training in narrative medicine will lead me in the future.