

Narrative Fragmentation and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

This paper examines how Toni Morrison employs narrative fragmentation in *Beloved* as a formal strategy for representing the psychological and cultural trauma of slavery. While critics have extensively analyzed Morrison's use of nonlinear narrative, this paper argues that fragmentation operates not merely as stylistic innovation but as ethical imperative—a narrative mode that refuses the coherence and closure that would falsify the ongoing, unresolved nature of slavery's trauma. Through close reading of the novel's temporal disruptions, focalization shifts, and linguistic ruptures, analyzed through postcolonial trauma theory, I demonstrate that Morrison's fragmented narrative performs what Cathy Caruth terms the "crisis of representation" inherent in trauma testimony. The novel's structure mirrors the psychological mechanism of traumatic memory, where past intrudes violently into present, temporality collapses, and survivors struggle to construct coherent narratives from overwhelming experience. Furthermore, I argue that this narrative strategy constitutes an act of postcolonial resistance, disrupting Western narrative conventions that privilege linear temporality, unified subjectivity, and narrative resolution—conventions that served colonial ideologies of progress and civilization. By rendering visible what slavery attempted to destroy—African American subjectivity, memory, and community—while simultaneously representing the irreparable damage inflicted, Morrison's fragmented narrative enacts what Paul Gilroy calls "the politics of transfiguration," transforming historical trauma into cultural memory while refusing false redemption.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, narrative fragmentation, trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, slavery, African American literature

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In the opening pages of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, readers confront a narrative that refuses conventional orientation. The novel begins not at the beginning but in media res, with a house haunted by "a baby's venom" and a family already fractured (Morrison 3). Time moves not forward but in spirals, circling back obsessively to a past that won't stay past. Characters appear without introduction; events occur without

linear sequence; trauma erupts into the present tense without warning. This narrative fragmentation—what critic Mae Henderson describes as Morrison's "discontinuous, non-linear narrative strategy"—has prompted extensive scholarly analysis examining its relationship to African American oral traditions, modernist experimentation, and the representation of traumatic memory (Henderson 79). Yet while critics have productively analyzed these formal innovations, insufficient attention has been paid to how Morrison's fragmented narrative constitutes not merely an aesthetic choice but an ethical imperative and a political act.

This paper argues that narrative fragmentation in *BeLoved* operates as Morrison's formal solution to the representational crisis posed by slavery's trauma—a crisis that demands representing the unrepresentable, narrating what exceeds narrative capacity, and making present a past that cannot be fully recovered yet refuses to remain past. Through close reading of the novel's temporal disruptions, focalization shifts, and linguistic ruptures, analyzed through postcolonial trauma theory, I demonstrate that Morrison's narrative structure performs the psychological mechanics of traumatic memory while simultaneously enacting postcolonial resistance to Western narrative conventions complicit with colonial ideologies. The novel's fragmentation refuses the coherence that would falsify trauma's ongoing nature while disrupting narrative forms that historically served to rationalize and naturalize slavery. In fragmenting her narrative, Morrison fragments the reader's comfortable distance, compelling us to experience—however inadequately—something of trauma's destabilizing force.

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"Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken": Trauma and the Crisis of Representation

Trauma studies, particularly as developed by Cathy Caruth, provides crucial framework for understanding Morrison's narrative strategies. Caruth argues that trauma cannot be simply remembered or narrated in conventional ways because traumatic experience arrives too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully experienced or processed at the time of its occurrence. Trauma, therefore, is not fully experienced as it happens but only in its belated repetition, its compulsive return in flashbacks, nightmares, and involuntary memories (Caruth 4-5). This temporal paradox—that traumatic experience is paradoxically both too early and too late to be consciously registered—creates what Caruth terms a "crisis of truth and representation" (7). How does one narrate an experience that was not, in crucial senses, experienced as it occurred? How does one represent memories that return not as narrative but as sensory fragments, emotional overwhelm, and temporal collapse?

Morrison confronts this crisis throughout *BeLoved* through narrative structures that enact rather than merely describe trauma's psychological operations. The novel's temporal disorder reflects traumatic memory's refusal of chronological sequence. Past events don't remain safely past but erupt violently into the present without warning, just as traumatic memories ambush survivors with the force of present experience. Consider the scene where Sethe stands at the kitchen table cutting up beets when suddenly, without narrative transition, she is back at Sweet Home experiencing her assault: "She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat

their wings" (Morrison 163). The shift from present to past occurs mid-sentence, mid-thought, with only the verb tense change signaling temporal dislocation. Past doesn't intrude into present through marked flashback or memory narration; rather, the boundary between past and present dissolves, enacting how traumatic memory collapses temporal distance.

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This temporal collapse intensifies throughout the novel as Beloved's presence materializes past trauma in the present. Once Beloved appears, Sethe's memories no longer arrive as discrete flashbacks but instead overwhelm the narrative present entirely. Part Two's interior monologues by Sethe, Denver, and Beloved exemplify this temporal dissolution. The section begins with Sethe's monologue addressed to Beloved: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (200). What follows is not linear narration but associative, circling discourse where past and present intermingle without distinction. Sethe moves from addressing Beloved in the present to reliving past events as though they were occurring now, then back to present assertions about Beloved's presence. The prose exhibits syntactic fragmentation—short phrases separated by periods rather than subordinated through complex syntax: "I wouldn't draw breath without my children. I told Baby Suggs that and she got down on her knees to beg God's pardon for me. Still, it's so. My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is" (203). The staccato rhythm, lack of subordination, and shifts between temporal frames enact consciousness overwhelmed by traumatic memory, unable to maintain narrative coherence or temporal boundaries.

Critics have noted how this fragmented form reflects African American oral storytelling traditions, particularly the call-and-response pattern and circular rather than linear narrative movement. Marilyn Sanders Mobley argues that Morrison draws on "the Afro-American oral tradition" where "memory is not a singular, monolithic, or linear phenomenon but a complex, shifting, and dynamic process" (Mobley 361). This reading productively connects Morrison's formal innovations to African American cultural practices. However, focusing exclusively on cultural tradition risks naturalizing what is also Morrison's deliberate aesthetic response to trauma's representational crisis. The fragmentation operates simultaneously as cultural inheritance and as formal strategy specifically suited to representing consciousness shattered by slavery's violence.

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Morrison herself has spoken about the impossibility of narrating slavery's full horror and the ethical dangers of attempting to do so. In interviews, she describes walking a "very tight tightrope" between making slavery's violence visible and avoiding pornographic spectacle that would exploit or re-traumatize (Morrison, "The Art of Fiction" 241). Narrative fragmentation becomes one solution to this dilemma—by breaking narrative coherence, Morrison prevents readers from consuming trauma as entertainment or assuming comfortable mastery over historical horrors we cannot fully comprehend. The narrative withholds more than it reveals, maintaining silences and gaps that resist our desire for complete knowledge. As Beloved tells Denver: "I am Beloved and she is mine... the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none... in the beginning we could vomit it now we do not... someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it" (210-211). Beloved's monologue fragments completely—punctuation disappears, pronouns confuse, syntax breaks down. The passage gestures toward Middle Passage trauma but refuses to make it fully narratable or comprehensible. This refusal, I

argue, constitutes ethical choice—Morrison represents trauma's unrepresentability rather than falsely claiming to represent trauma itself fully.

"Rememory": Temporal Collapse and the Persistence of the Past

Morrison introduces the neologism "rememory" to describe how past trauma persists in the present as more than mere memory. As Sethe explains to Denver: "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world... Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (Morrison 35-36). This concept challenges Western epistemologies that sharply distinguish past from present, interior from exterior, individual from collective. Rememory suggests that traumatic past maintains material presence, existing "out there, in the world" rather than safely contained within individual consciousness. Past events can be encountered, "bumped into," by those who didn't experience them directly.

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This temporal ontology—where past remains dangerously present—finds formal expression in the novel's chronological disorder and narrative layering. The narrative doesn't progress linearly forward but circles repeatedly back to the same traumatic scenes, approaching them from different angles, through different consciousnesses, with gradually accumulating detail. The murder of Beloved, the novel's traumatic center, appears and disappears throughout the text, fully narrated only near the novel's end, yet referenced, circled around, remembered in fragments throughout. Stamp Paid first references it obliquely to Paul D: "She was crawling already when I got here. About a week, I guess, after baby Suggs died" (156). Later, Stamp remembers more: "Two feet, not four. He looked for the other two" (157). Only much later does the narrative provide fuller account, filtered through Stamp Paid's consciousness: "Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an ice pick in the other" (149).

This narrative circling enacts what trauma theorists describe as the compulsion to repeat—the way traumatic memories return obsessively, demanding to be confronted again and again without ever being fully mastered or resolved. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma, arguing that acting out involves compulsive repetition while working through involves gaining critical distance and perspective (LaCapra 142-143). Morrison's narrative performs both movements simultaneously—the obsessive return to traumatic scenes suggests acting out, yet the accumulation of perspectives and gradual revelation of details suggests working through. Importantly, the novel never achieves complete working through or narrative closure. Even as events become clearer, their meaning remains contested, their trauma unresolved.

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The temporal collapse reaches its most extreme in Beloved's interior monologue, which conflates multiple times and spaces—the Middle Passage, slavery at Sweet Home, the murder, the present haunting—into a single nightmarish present tense: "All of it is now it is always now... the men without skin push us from the beginning in the sea some go in with them die with them I do not... the man on my face has done it... now I know... there is no iron circle around her neck... she is my face smiling at me" (Morrison 210-214). The pronoun confusion ("she is my face"), absence of punctuation, and temporal markers ("it is always now") create prose that resists linear reading and comprehension. Critics have debated whether this monologue represents Beloved's consciousness, Sethe's mother's experience on slave ships, or a collective voice of all those who died in the Middle Passage. The indeterminacy seems deliberate—Morrison refuses to clarify, maintaining productive ambiguity about whose trauma speaks here and whether individual and collective trauma can even be distinguished.

This temporal structure has significant implications for understanding slavery's ongoing legacies. By rendering past as continually present, Morrison challenges narratives of historical progress that would contain slavery safely in the past as something "over" or "overcome." The novel insists that slavery's trauma persists, that its violence continues to haunt, that it remains "not a story to pass on" yet also a story that must be continually confronted (Morrison 274-275). Critics like Jennifer Fleischner argue that this temporal structure "challenges the notion that slavery is over" and "insists on the continuing presence of the past in the present" (Fleischner 63). The fragmented narrative prevents readers from achieving comfortable historical distance, instead compelling us to confront slavery's trauma as ongoing rather than concluded.

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Fractured Subjectivity: Focalization and the Dissolution of Self

Beyond temporal fragmentation, Morrison employs shifting focalization to represent how slavery's violence fractures subjective coherence. The novel moves between different characters' perspectives with little warning, sometimes shifting mid-paragraph or even mid-sentence. This narrative promiscuity reflects what slavery attempted to destroy—the enslaved's autonomous selfhood, their status as subjects rather than objects, their capacity to possess and narrate their own experiences.

Part One primarily focalizes through Sethe but shifts unpredictably to Paul D, Denver, or even the unnamed community voice. These shifts often occur without clear markers, requiring readers to piece together whose perspective guides the narrative. Consider the scene where Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road:

He had done no more for Sethe than she had done for him. And Baby Suggs' voice in the keeping room. And the pictures of all of them they had drawn in their minds' eye took on flesh before him. Sethe's was among them, with the arms too long. But he wasn't stopping to take a closer look. [...] Paul D looked at his tobacco tin, held it, examined it. He knew Denver was right. He couldn't get himself to leave this haunted house, but he had closed his heart off long ago. (Morrison 45-48)

The passage begins with "he" referring to Paul D but quickly shifts to Paul D's perspective on Sethe before returning to Paul D's focalization. The fluidity creates textured understanding of multiple subjectivities but also disorients, preventing readers from settling into single, stable perspective.

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This dissolution of focalization boundaries reaches its extreme in Part Two's monologues, where Sethe, Denver, and Beloved speak in succession, then merge: "Beloved / You are my sister / You are my daughter / You are my face; you are me / I have found you again; you have come back to me / You are my Beloved / You are mine / You are mine / You are mine" (Morrison 216-217). The pronouns blur; voices become indistinguishable; the boundaries between self and other collapse. Deborah Horvitz reads this merger as representing "the breakdown of boundaries between self and other characteristic of pre-Oedipal mother-daughter symbiosis," while Ashraf Rushdy argues it enacts "the destruction of individuation that slavery effects" (Horvitz 158; Rushdy 566). Both readings illuminate important dimensions, yet we must also recognize how this formal dissolution enacts trauma's destruction of coherent selfhood. Slavery attempted to reduce the enslaved to objects, to destroy their status as subjects with autonomous interiority. Morrison's fragmented focalization simultaneously represents this destruction and resists it—by giving voice to multiple subjective perspectives, by revealing the rich interior lives slavery attempted to annihilate, the narrative recuperates the subjectivity slavery denied while refusing to falsify the damage inflicted.

The text's most radical focalization occurs through Beloved herself—a ghost, a revenant, a materialized trauma whose very ontological status remains indeterminate. Is she the murdered baby returned? A traumatized young woman escaped from captivity? A collective embodiment of all those lost to slavery? The text refuses to resolve these questions, maintaining Beloved's irreducible otherness. Her monologue in Part Two fragments language itself: "I am Beloved and she is mine [...] how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" (210). The breakdown of syntax, the collapse of subject-object distinctions, the refusal of punctuation—all enact consciousness that exceeds Western conceptions of bounded individuality.

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This focus through Beloved—through trauma itself personified—represents Morrison's most radical formal intervention. Western realist narrative typically maintains clear separation between narrator and narrated, subject and object, observer and observed. By focalizing through Beloved, Morrison collapses these distinctions, forcing readers to inhabit—however inadequately—trauma's perspective itself. This is disorienting, disturbing, perhaps ethically problematic in its appropriation of traumatic voice. Yet it also performs what Elaine Scarry argues about pain and its representation—that pain destroys language, that trauma exceeds our capacity for representation, yet the ethical imperative remains to attempt representation despite its inevitable failure (Scarry 3-11). Beloved's monologue performs this paradox—it represents the unrepresentable through language that fragments under the weight of what it attempts to convey.

Postcolonial Resistance: Disrupting Western Narrative Forms

While trauma theory illuminates Morrison's formal strategies, postcolonial theory reveals their political dimensions. Western realist narrative conventions—linear temporality, unified perspective, causal logic, narrative resolution—developed alongside and served colonial expansion. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, the nineteenth-century realist novel participated in constructing colonial worldviews that naturalized empire, represented colonized peoples as lacking subjectivity or history, and embedded assumptions about civilization, progress, and European superiority (Said 70-97). The linear bildungsroman narrating individual development from innocence to maturity paralleled and reinforced colonial narratives of progress from primitive to civilized. Unified narrative perspective reflected and reinforced colonial epistemologies claiming objective, totalizing knowledge of colonized territories and peoples.

Morrison's fragmented narrative disrupts these conventions, refusing the formal structures that served colonial ideology. Linear temporality suggested historical progress, naturalizing colonialism as inevitable development. Morrison's circular, fragmented time refuses this progressivism, insisting instead on the ongoing presence of the past and the incompleteness of historical "progress." Where realist convention unified narrative perspective around a privileged observer position, Morrison's shifting focalization refuses singular authority, instead multiplying perspectives and insisting on the partiality of any single viewpoint.

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Paul Gilroy's concept of "the politics of transfiguration" provides useful framework for understanding Morrison's narrative strategies as postcolonial resistance. Gilroy argues that Black Atlantic culture developed alternative aesthetic forms that "celebrated the emergence of new desires, social relations, and modes of association" while simultaneously "derived from the experiences of terror and systematic violence which made members of these African populations an abject slave class" (Gilroy 37). These cultural forms don't simply resist domination but create new aesthetic possibilities that transform suffering into cultural memory and collective identity. Morrison's fragmented narrative performs this transfiguration—it represents slavery's trauma while simultaneously creating narrative forms that resist colonial aesthetic conventions and assert African American cultural agency.

The novel's refusal of resolution exemplifies this resistance. Western realist narratives typically move toward closure—conflicts resolve, mysteries clarify, protagonists achieve understanding or transformation. *Beloved* refuses such comfort. The novel ends not with resolution but with continued uncertainty and fragmentation. Beloved disappears but her trauma persists. The community forgets but also remembers: "It was not a story to pass on" appears three times on the final page, yet the novel itself has passed on this story to us (Morrison 274-275). The repetition performs contradiction—the story should not be told yet must be told; the trauma should be forgotten yet cannot be forgotten. This refusal of closure disrupts readers' desires for mastery and understanding, refusing the epistemological certainty that characterized colonial knowledge claims.

Morrison's narrative strategies also engage with and revise modernist fragmentation. High modernist writers—Joyce, Woolf, Eliot—famously employed fragmented narratives, stream of consciousness, and temporal dislocation. Morrison inherits these techniques but transforms them, deploying fragmentation not as symptom of modern alienation or aesthetic experimentation for its own sake but as specific

response to slavery's historical trauma and ongoing legacies. Where Eliot's *The Waste Land* uses fragmentation to represent European cultural decline, Morrison employs fragmentation to represent African American survival and resistance. This distinction matters—it refuses the universalizing gestures of high modernism that obscured historical specificity and power relations, instead insisting on the particular, located, politically engaged nature of Morrison's aesthetic.

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Furthermore, Morrison's fragmentation connects to African and African American cultural forms that colonial discourse positioned as primitive or inferior. The nonlinear, circular narrative structure reflects African storytelling traditions that colonial anthropology denigrated as evidence of cognitive inferiority, inability to think abstractly or historically. The narrative's emphasis on orality, call-and-response patterns, and communal rather than individual voice draws on African American oral traditions that white supremacist ideology dismissed as unsophisticated. By centering these forms in a sophisticated literary novel, Morrison challenges colonial hierarchies that privileged European aesthetic conventions while denigrating African and African American cultural practices. The very fragmentation that some contemporary reviewers criticized as confusing or difficult becomes a mode of cultural assertion and resistance.

"This Is Not a Story to Pass On": The Ethics and Politics of Remembering

The novel's paradoxical final pages crystallize its ethical complexity regarding traumatic memory and its representation. The community women who exorcise Beloved return home and immediately begin forgetting: "Remembering seemed unwise" (Morrison 274). What follows is a litany of forgetting: "So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. [...] Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?" (274). The passage then shifts to the narrator's voice—the only extended moment of narratorial commentary in the novel—asserting: "This is not a story to pass on" (274-275).

The phrase appears three times in succession, each iteration gaining complexity. First statement: "This is not a story to pass on." Could mean: don't transmit this story; it's too traumatic to share. Or: this story shouldn't end, shouldn't be "passed on" in the sense of finished or concluded. Second statement: "So they forgot her. [...] This was not a story to pass on." The context suggests forgetting is necessary, protective, perhaps inevitable. Third statement: "Down by the stream [...] the print is there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. Beloved." The text insists Beloved is gone, is only weather, yet her name appears as the novel's final word, asserting continued presence.

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This paradoxical ending—forget but remember, pass on but don't pass on—enacts the novel's ethical position regarding traumatic memory. Complete recovery from trauma is impossible, would falsify

trauma's ongoing nature. Yet dwelling exclusively in trauma is equally impossible, would prevent survival and futurity. The community must forget to live, yet must remember to honor the dead and resist historical amnesia. Morrison's fragmented narrative performs this double movement—it represents trauma while also moving beyond exclusive preoccupation with trauma, remembers while also allowing space for forgetting, testifies to suffering while also affirming survival.

Critics debate whether the ending represents healing or continued trauma, resolution or ongoing haunting. Some read the exorcism of Beloved and the reunion of Sethe and Paul D as suggesting recovery is possible, that traumatic past can finally be mourned and released. Others argue the text refuses such consolation, that the continued forgetting and the narrator's insistence on Beloved's erasure perform ongoing violence against the dead. Both readings capture important dimensions, yet perhaps the ambiguity is precisely the point. Morrison refuses to resolve the ethical dilemma she poses—how to live with traumatic history that can neither be fully remembered nor fully forgotten, that demands both testimony and silence, memory and forgetting.

The novel's final word—"Beloved"—stands alone on the page, separated from the preceding paragraph by white space, acting as both ending and non-ending. It names what should not be forgotten even as the text has just insisted on forgetting. It reasserts presence after pages describing erasure. It performs the text's central paradox—slavery's trauma must be remembered and confronted, yet also cannot be fully represented or resolved. Narrative fragmentation becomes Morrison's formal solution to this irresolvable dilemma, creating a text that testifies to trauma while respecting its irreducibility, that remembers while also acknowledging the limits and costs of memory, that speaks the unspeakable while maintaining silence about what exceeds language's capacity.

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Conclusion: Fragmentation as Form and as Imperative

Toni Morrison's narrative fragmentation in *Beloved* operates on multiple levels simultaneously—as formal innovation influenced by modernist experimentation and African American cultural traditions, as psychological realism representing trauma's effects on consciousness and memory, as ethical imperative refusing false coherence and closure, and as political resistance to Western narrative conventions complicit with colonial ideology. These dimensions are inseparable; the novel's form is its meaning, its aesthetic its ethics, its narrative structure its political stance.

By fragmenting linear temporality, Morrison refuses narratives of historical progress that would contain slavery safely in the past. By shifting focalization unpredictably, she disrupts colonial epistemologies claiming unified, objective knowledge. By breaking linguistic coherence, she represents trauma's assault on language and meaning-making. By refusing resolution, she respects trauma's ongoing nature and denies readers the comfort of narrative closure. Each formal choice constitutes both aesthetic achievement and ethical-political intervention.

The novel's fragmented form also transforms the reading experience itself. We cannot read *Beloved* passively, comfortably, from safe distance. The narrative disorients, demands active engagement, compels us to struggle with temporal confusion, perspective shifts, and withheld information. This formal

difficulty is not merely obstacle but invitation—Morrison invites readers to experience something of trauma's disorientation, to confront our limited capacity to comprehend slavery's horror, to recognize the ethical complexities involved in representing and remembering historical trauma. The fragmented form prevents us from consuming trauma as entertainment or achieving mastery through understanding; instead, it maintains the otherness and difficulty of traumatic experience while still insisting on the necessity of attempted representation.

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Future scholarship might productively examine how Morrison's formal strategies in *Beloved* influenced subsequent African American literature engaging with historical trauma, from Octavia Butler's neo-slave narratives to Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Additionally, comparing Morrison's narrative fragmentation to trauma representation in other postcolonial literatures—Edwidge Danticat's Haiti, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Nigeria, Arundhati Roy's India—could illuminate whether certain formal strategies transcend particular historical traumas or whether each trauma demands its own specific narrative innovations.

What remains clear is that Morrison's achievement in *Beloved* extends beyond creating a powerful novel about slavery—she has developed narrative forms adequate to representing what seems to exceed representation, creating aesthetic structures that perform trauma rather than merely describing it, that resist colonial narrative conventions while asserting African American cultural agency. The novel's fragmentation is not weakness or confusion but strength and clarity—it is Morrison's formal solution to the representational crisis posed by slavery's trauma, her aesthetic and ethical response to horrors that resist narrative yet demand testimony. In fragmenting her narrative, Morrison creates a text that, like the "rememories" it describes, continues to haunt us, refuses to stay past, demands ongoing engagement. This persistence—the novel's refusal to be finished with or passed on—constitutes both its aesthetic achievement and its political power, ensuring that slavery's trauma remains present, uncomfortable, unavoidable in American cultural memory.

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