



Research Paper

Ghostly Echoes: Cinematic and Literary Representations of Transgenerational Colonial Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) is still, like, one of the most psychologically dense and culturally important novels in American literary history. Here the piece looks at how Morrison builds transgenerational colonial trauma, meaning those inherited psychological injuries that move across generations through slavery, and also how Jonathan Demme's 1998 film version turns that same kind of harm into cinematic language. Using postcolonial ideas, trauma research, and memory scholarship, the article follows Morrison's supernatural as a kind of vehicle for mental haunting, then the function of "rememory" as a trauma mechanism, and finally how both the book and the movie deal with what many scholars now discuss in clinical terms as intergenerational trauma transmission. It also places Beloved inside wider academic conversations about colonial violence and its multigenerational effects. Research in epigenetics and trauma psychology keeps adding confirmation that these historical wounds are not only metaphorical inheritances—no they can leave measurable psychological and biological traces. Morrison seemed to already grasp that, intuitively, even before science caught up. So this article claims Beloved isn't just a ghost tale, but a careful, layered examination of how slavery's violence refuses to stay put in the past.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, cinematic trauma, rememory, transgenerational trauma, postcolonial literature, colonial violence

I. Introduction

Some stories kind of refuse to let you go, you know. *Beloved* is one of them, and it stays there. Published in 1987, Toni Morrison's novel takes its seed from a true case—Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who in 1856 killed her own daughter, not really as spectacle, but because she would rather not see her returned to slavery. At first the story sounds extreme, even unthinkable, until you sit with the logic of it, quietly, and then it becomes devastating.

What Morrison does with that historical core is, honestly extraordinary. She doesn't just retell the facts, she turns it into a kind of careful meditation on what trauma does to memory, identity, family, and time itself. The ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, who introduces herself as *Beloved*, isn't some horror movie trick. She's the embodiment of everything that cannot be erased, and also everything a traumatized community keeps trying—again and again—to hide under the floorboards.

Transgenerational trauma, sometimes described as intergenerational or historical trauma, points to psychological and emotional wounds that pass along from one generation to the next, even when the later people haven't directly lived through the original event. Researchers like Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, who studied trauma in Native American communities, and Rachel Yehuda, who worked on Holocaust survivor descendants, have documented this with real rigor. Their findings suggest trauma isn't only about personal psychology. It moves through families, communities, and whole cultures.

Morrison seems to grasp this long before most clinicians gave it a name. This article looks at how she does it through the novel's narrative design, its treatment of memory, and its haunted, splintered characters — and then how the 1998 film adaptation by Jonathan Demme tries to translate that inward, unsettled experience onto screen, even though that's never straightforward.

II. Theoretical Grounding: Understanding Transgenerational Trauma

2.1 Defining the Concept

The term “transgenerational trauma” kinda moved into mainstream psychological talk mostly after studies on Holocaust survivors and then, their kids. Rachel Yehuda and her colleagues over at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai did landmark work that found children of Holocaust survivors had altered cortisol levels and also increased stress reactivity, those biological patterns seemed to line up with the PTSD responses shown by their parents even if the children never personally lived through the concentration camps. It showed up across several peer reviewed studies and there was one especially notable paper in *Biological Psychiatry* in 2016.

More recently, epigenetic findings have suggested that trauma might leave molecular imprints on DNA that could then be passed along. Of course, this is still debated a lot in active science, but the psychological dimensions connected to inherited trauma are considered pretty well established now. The American Psychological Association’s 2021 Stress in America report says that historical and ongoing discrimination is a major generator of chronic stress for Black Americans, and that the stress then builds up across generations through environmental, cultural, and psychological routes, kind of a slow compounding effect rather than a single event.

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart introduced the idea of a “historical trauma response” in the 1990s, and she was drawing from her work with Lakota communities. She described it as a “constellation of features in reaction to a massive cumulative group trauma across generations.”. And this framework fits right into what Morrison depicts in *Beloved*, where a whole community of formerly enslaved people is so crushed by their shared past that they can’t speak it, and even when they try they can hardly process it, at least not in the usual way.

2.2 Colonial Violence as the Source

It’s important to be clear about what we mean when we say “colonial trauma” in relation to American slavery. Like, slavery wasn’t just forced work. It was a systematic kind of wrecking of personhood. Enslaved people were legally treated as property, and that sounds clinical but it was actually massive. Their names, languages, religions, and even those family ties were routinely erased. And then on top of that there was physical torture, sexual violence, and this constant psychic dread, the kind that comes from being held under total powerlessness, day after day.

People like Saidiya Hartman, in her foundational work *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), talk about this as a particular form of terror. Not only terror when somebody is openly brutal, but also the everyday demand of compliance, the performance of submission, and how “spectacle” itself got turned into a weapon. The injury didn’t just disappear at Emancipation. It got carried forward, like inherited damage, through family structures, communal silences, economic deprivation, and, as Morrison shows us, through the actual geography of memory.

III. Morrison's Architecture of Trauma

3.1 Rememory: When the Past Is Never Past

One of Morrison’s most brilliant conceptual contributions in *Beloved* is that word, “rememory.” Sethe tries to explain it to Denver like, “Places, places are still there, and what’s more, if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.”

So no, this isn’t nostalgia or something soft like that. Rememory is Morrison’s term for how traumatic memory works, different from ordinary recall. It’s involuntary it slips in, it’s intrusive, and it feels almost external or, kind of environmental. A lot of trauma scholars will say this matches what traumatic memory does in real life. Ordinary memory gets handled through the hippocampus and then it gets folded into a tidy personal storyline. Traumatic memory, on the other hand, is more busted up—fragmented, sensory, and it interrupts you. It doesn’t merely “come back.” it returns, like it’s happening again for the first time, again and again.

Morrison then gives this psychological reality this spatial, almost metaphysical shape. The trauma isn’t only “in a person,” it’s in the land, in the house at 124 Bluestone Road. It can ambush you even if you weren’t there when it happened, and somehow that feels true in the book. That’s her method of making a point: slavery’s violence isn’t just the private burden of one survivor. It’s collective and it’s environmental, and the next generation will meet it, whether or not anyone ever tells them.

3.2 The Haunted House as National Metaphor

The house at 124 is kinda central to understanding the novel’s architecture of trauma, like it’s the whole basis or something. The novel opens, famously, with “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom.” From that first line, Morrison basically tells us the past is not gone—not really. It stays active, embodied, and dangerous. In trauma literature, the haunted space is often treated as a common trope. But Morrison doesn’t do it in a purely

metaphorical way. She insists on, well, the literalness of the thing. The baby ghost smashes mirrors, tips over furniture, and makes animals just flee. And this is a big deal. By refusing the haunting to be only symbolic, Morrison sort of forces readers to accept inherited trauma as a material reality, not merely a psychological phenomenon. It's physical, embodied, even if you can't always touch it.

And that's also why the film adaptation feels extra challenging. Jonathan Demme had to face the problem of how to show a ghost that Morrison had already written as simultaneously supernatural and psychologically real. His choice—casting Thandiwe Newton as a flesh-and-blood Beloved who is also, somehow, clearly spectral—gets mixed reactions from critics. Yet it still fits what the text demands, like the real interpretive puzzle.

As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between Morrison's narrative techniques and their corresponding psychological trauma concepts reveals a structured kind of system of representation, mapping elements like rememory to intrusive traumatic recall, and Beloved's embodiment to somatized historical memory.

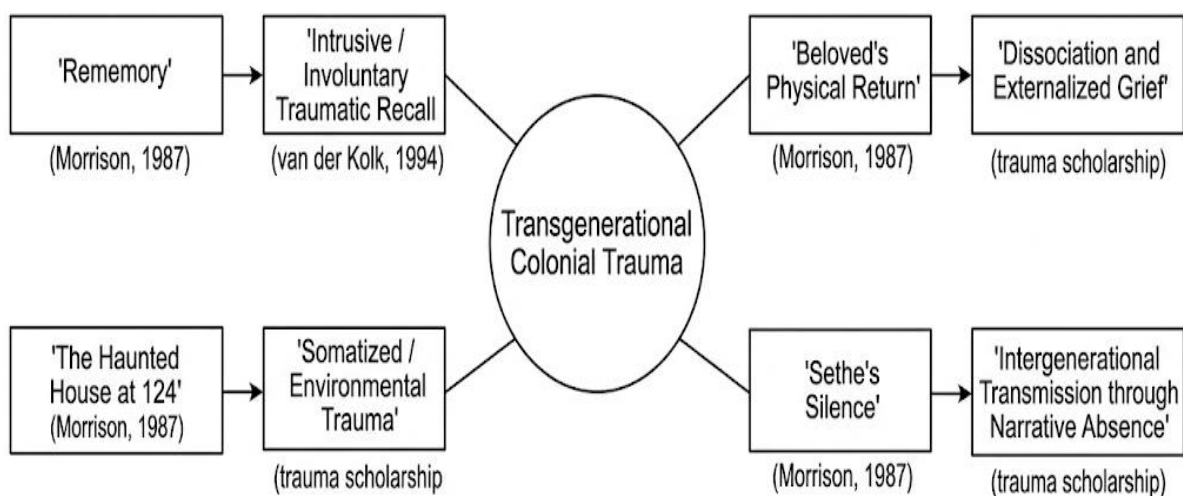


Figure 1: Conceptual Map of Morrison's Narrative Techniques and Their Correspondence to Trauma Psychology Concepts

This conceptual diagram kind of maps the key narrative tricks in *Beloved* to their analogs in trauma psychology scholarship. The middle point is called "Transgenerational Colonial Trauma" and from there, a few strands go out, to four narrative-psychological matchups. First there's "Rememory", which I'm reading alongside intrusive and involuntary traumatic recall the way van der Kolk, 1994 puts it. Then "The Haunted House at 124" which is tied to somatized or maybe more accurately, embodied and environmental trauma. There's also "Beloved's Physical Return" that I connect with dissociation plus grief that shows up outside the self. And lastly "Sethe's Silence", which points to how something gets carried across generations, through narrative absence, or the lack of telling.

Overall this isn't a literal diagram you could just reproduce it's more of a conceptual synthesis, built from close reading of Morrison (1987) and from trauma scholarship, including Yehuda et al. (2016) and Herman (1992).

3.3 Silence as Transmission

In *Beloved* there's another way trauma kinda drifts through generations, and honestly it's one that gets less spotlight than it should. It's silence. Sethe doesn't really tell Denver what happened in the woodshed, not the real details or anything close. And then the Black women community in Cincinnati, they basically cut Sethe off, in pieces, in part because they feel guilt, partly from fear of Beloved's ghost. But also because they just don't know how to carry what Sethe did, like how do you hold it without it spilling into you.

That silence ends up being traumatizing too. It makes a real hole in Denver's grasp of her own story and identity. Denver knows something horrible happened, but since there's no account to go with it, she keeps circling the injury instead of stepping into it. This pattern is almost annoyingly consistent with what family therapists have written about second and third generation trauma survivors. Even psychiatrist Dan Siegel points out, in his work on interpersonal neurobiology, that kids build their sense of self partly from the narratives their

parents share about the family's past. So when those narratives are missing—or bent out of shape by trauma—the absence itself becomes psychologically shaping, more or less like a silent lesson she has to learn.

IV. The Cinematic Translation: Demme's *Beloved* (1998)

4.1 What Film Can and Cannot Do

Adapting *Beloved* for the screen was always going to be like a near-impossible task, you know. The novel's power is basically in its interior worlds, in that thing Morrison does where she just moves fluidly between Sethe's fractured consciousness, Denver's isolation, *Beloved*'s nonlinear kind of almost pre-verbal narrations and then the community's collective memory. Film, though it works a bit from the outside in. It's show surfaces, faces, bodies, rooms.

Jonathan Demme, working from Akosua Busia's screenplay makes some genuinely powerful choices and yet it still feels like you're catching lightning in a bottle. The film opens with a hypnotic red-light sequence that immediately tells you we are in this space between the living and the dead. Oprah Winfrey, who also produced the film and had pushed for years to get it onto the screen, gives a performance that's raw, tired, and full of exhausted dignity as Sethe. Danny Glover anchors the whole thing as Paul D, and his trauma as a formerly enslaved man comes through through stillness and restraint, not big speeches or anything.

Still, the central obstacle is *Beloved* herself. Thandiwe Newton plays her as physically there, but temporally out of place, moving oddly, speaking in fragments, and somehow her wants are both infantile and overwhelming at the same time. This lands in certain moments. The physical fact of *Beloved* inside the house forces the other characters into a confrontation that's embodied, with the past right in front of them. But the novel's version of *Beloved* also has extraordinary interior monologues, those stream-of-consciousness passages that almost feel like the traumatized unconscious is talking straight through the page. Film can't really bring that over directly, not cleanly.

4.2 Embodying the Unrepresentable

What Demme does particularly well is that he keeps the violence of slavery, that material fact of it, right up front. There is a sequence that shows Paul D's memory of the Georgia chain gang—men locked up underground in boxes, forced into a grim everyday ritual of survival—and it's truly harrowing and direct. It does something similar to the novel, too, but with the added weight of the visual image: the film won't really make the brutality look "pretty." It just shows it plainly, no big dramatic score, no cutaway relief. Like, just the thing, nothing wrapped around it

That matters because a persistent challenge when you try to show historical trauma on screen is this pull toward aestheticizing suffering, and in the process you end up... paradoxically domesticating it. You know, making it beautiful, bearable, even sort of reassuring in the way it resolves. Demme largely refuses that. The movie doesn't hand the audience much comfort at all.

Scholars of trauma cinema like E. Ann Kaplan, in her book *Trauma Culture* (2005), have argued that cinema can work as what she calls a "witness" to traumatic events, kind of creating an affective transmission between the historical experience and contemporary viewers. Demme's *Beloved* tries to do this, with results that are uneven, yet often genuinely striking.

4.3 The Film's Reception and Its Lessons

The movie kinda flopped commercially, which is worth sitting with for a second. It came out on that same October 1998 weekend as Adam Sandler's *Antz* and the historical comedy *Pleasantville*, and *Beloved* ended up making, roughly, about \$8 million domestically against a \$53 million budget, according to Box Office Mojo. Critics were... split. Roger Ebert handed it four stars. But a lot of the mainstream reviews felt it was overwhelming, hard to follow, or just confusing, sort of all at once.

What this reaction tells us is something about cultural limits, like where trauma is allowed to go, and how it's supposed to be shown—and consumed. *Beloved*, both the novel and the film, doesn't really let the audience get comfortable. It requires a lot, from readers, and from viewers too. And in 1998, at least in mainstream American culture, audiences weren't ready to be required of in that specific way.

V. Theoretical Frameworks for Reading Trauma in *Beloved*

5.1 Cathy Caruth and the Traumatic Uncanny

Cathy Caruth's foundational work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) sort of argues that trauma doesn't really want a clean, straightforward story to hold it. She says trauma is marked by latency — like the way an event isn't fully lived through when it happens but later comes back, in a kind of distorted, fractured form. In her framing, the survivor isn't fully there with the original moment, instead they're kind of haunted by it afterward, even if the "when" keeps slipping.

And yeah this lines up with Morrison formal choices. That woodshed scene where Sethe kills Beloved, it isn't really narrated plainly for most of the novel. It shows up sideways, in fragments through other peoples perspectives. And when it finally gets closer, more fully, it still feels unfinished, still half obscured. Morrison makes the reader feel the novels main trauma the way a traumatized person experiences memory: in pieces, never totally, never without those gaps that keep interrupting.

5.2 Postcolonial Memory Studies

Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) sort of offers a different but still productive frame. Gilroy basically suggests that Black Atlantic culture is defined by what he calls a "double consciousness", meaning the experience of being both inside and also outside modernity. It gets shaped by slavery and the Middle Passage, but not in a vague way—rather in ways that sort of pull Black cultural memory out from the dominant European historical story.

Beloved fits right into this. The novel insists on the specific texture of African American historical experience, not only as trauma, but also as a wellspring of particular cultural and communal forms of resistance, remembrance, and recovery. And the women who gather at the end, they collectively exorcise Beloved, but that isn't simply a supernatural wrap-up, not really. It reads more like a picture of community grounded healing, drawing on specifically African American cultural resources, in a way that feels both intimate and political, at the same time.

5.3 The Body as Archive

One of the most powerful sides of *Beloved*, is how it sorta insists on the body as a place where history can keep happening. Sethe's back, scarred from the whipping, is shaped into something Baby Suggs calls a "chokecherry tree," and that back is basically an archive of colonial violence. It shows up for other folks, but not for Sethe herself she cant see her own back. That ends up being a pretty striking metaphor for inherited and embodied trauma, like it stays in the body, others can read it, but the person carrying it cant really look at it directly.

Bessel van der Kolk's landmark research, gathered and set down in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), also lays out how trauma doesn't live only in memory. It sits, in the nervous system, in muscle patterns and in things like hyper vigilance, physical arousal, and reactivity. Morrison had, already a long time before, that same intuition. In *Beloved* the body is not some separate container from history. The body is history, plain and simple.

VI. Conclusion

Toni Morrison once said she wrote *Beloved* because it was a story that needed to be told — and that the historical suppression of slavery's horrors in mainstream American culture was its own kind of violence, kinda a quiet one. Both the novel and Demme's adaptation, even if they come with different levels of success, seem to take that mandate seriously, like no wiggle room.

What makes *Beloved* so extraordinary is the precision, with which Morrison grasps trauma — not as some personal misfortune but as a structural thing, historical and deeply social. The ghost of *Beloved* isn't just around to spook you. She's there to insist on being counted, acknowledged mourned, all in a single breath. She becomes the embodiment of everything colonial violence tried to make less-than human, less-than person, less-than grief-worthy.

Science has, slowly but surely, caught up to what Morrison basically saw already back in 1987. Epigenetics, trauma neuroscience, community health research and related work — all of it points to the same conclusion: historical wounds are not just metaphors. They are real, they get inherited, and they keep going until they're properly faced, properly reckoned with.

Reading *Beloved* today is still a form of reckoning. And honestly the fact that it can still make readers and viewers feel profoundly uncomfortable still manages to break something open is exactly the point, not a side effect.

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