

# Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory in Contemporary African American and Native American Fiction

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
Sociology – Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Sociology

Tomislava Čavar

**Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory in Contemporary  
African American and Native American Fiction**

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2023

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## Abstract

Although the novels *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Tracks* (1988) by Louise Erdrich belong to two distinct literary traditions – the African American and the Native American, respectively – both of them highlight the themes of memory and trauma and convey the experience of disenfranchisement and victimization of the subaltern. This paper analyzes and compares the two novels in regards to their depiction of the cultural trauma and the collective memory of their respective communities. The analysis of Morrison's novel focuses on the depiction of Black community's historical trauma, the re-writing of history, the role of storytelling in that process, and the (re)creation of African American identity post slavery. It also explores the correspondence between the mother-daughter relationships in the novel and the author's own search for her nameless ancestors in an attempt to fill the gaps mainstream historiography has left behind. The analysis of *Tracks* focuses on the novel's portrayal of the wider cultural trauma of the Native community as well as its function as a historical counter-narrative. The paper argues that Erdrich's novel celebrates cultural translation and adaptation as a means of cultural survival and foregrounds the importance of land to maintaining Native identity. It also demonstrates that in both novels, the ghost image serves not only as a symbol of collective reminiscence and healing but also as a signifier of communal identification. Lastly, the paper asserts that both novels employ the theme of substitute parenting as a strategy to secure communal survival and cultural continuity and that both of them end on a positive note, communicating a message of hope.

*Keywords:* Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, neo-slave narrative, African American literature, Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*, Native American literature, cultural identity, cultural trauma, collective memory.

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## **Introduction**

While individually very specific, contemporary African American and Native American literature share certain key characteristics, related to their foundation in the history and experience of oppression. In both of these literary traditions, the concept of communal and cultural identity is irrevocably intertwined with severe traumatic experiences and near cultural desolation. To be Black or Native today is to be a survivor – a title carrying a great sense of pride but also a great burden. This sense of duality – of wanting to forget and remember, judge and forgive, look back and move on – permeates the present-day literature of these two groups. Contemporary African American and Native American writers are compelled to reach back into the past in order to not only correct the “official” narrative and retrace their roots but also reconnect with their ancestors and confront their own painful legacy.

This paper examines how these mechanisms of confronting traumatic memories, healing, and retracing and passing down one’s culture are depicted in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* and Louise Erdrich’s 1988 novel *Tracks*. It analyzes the strategies these novels use in order to capture the spirit of the two respective oral traditions. It looks at how Morrison utilizes the neo-slave narrative genre to discover and partially invent the missing African American history while also exploring the post-abolition African American identity and its traumatized emotional state. It argues that *Beloved* encapsulates the journey of the whole African American community and its wider cultural devastation through the story of one family’s haunting and healing – their struggle with broken family bonds, repressed trauma, and the eventual resolution and hope brought on by the acknowledgment and internalization of traumatic memories. A similar argument is applied to *Tracks*, which chronicles one family’s struggle to survive and preserve their land and cultural identity in the White-dominated world, by relating the characters’ struggle to real-life challenges faced by the whole Native American community. The paper also discusses Erdrich’s novel as a counterpoint to the mainstream historiography, focusing on its depiction of cultural translation as a means of cultural survival as well as its depiction of tradition as a fluid, changing essence.

## 1. *Beloved*

### 1.1. The Neo-Slave Narrative Genre

Published in 1987, Morrison's novel belongs to a continuously growing body of work known as the neo-slave narrative. The term was first coined in 1987 by Bernard Bell, who defined the genre as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). Rushdy later presented a more restricted definition by describing neo-slave narratives as texts which "assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative" (*Neo-slave Narratives* 3). Perhaps the broadest and simplest definition of this genre is given by Babb, who summarizes that "The term neo-slave narrative generally references contemporary works that adopt the antebellum narrative of the enslaved to illuminate conceptions of race, as well as the importance of perspective and historiography" (218). The works falling under this definition contain "an array of genres, including realist historical fiction, historiographic metafiction, ghost stories, fantasy, speculative and science fiction, and even vampire tales" (Dubey 332). They emerged in the post-World War II period, flourishing during the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movements of 1960s and 1970s, with the literary floodgate being opened by the publishing of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966. The genre has since come to contain an abundance of works, some of the most notable being Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and, of course, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987).

Neo-slave narratives appear, in part, out of the need to "redress the gaps and misrepresentations of dominant history through narrative to fulfill what Clarisse Zimra describes as 'the ethical imperative of inventing a past that would otherwise disappear'" (Anim-Addo and Lima 2). On one hand, the original slave narratives left many things unsaid. They were written for the specific purpose of aiding the abolitionist movement; thus, their authors adjusted their narratives to fit their goal. As Dubey points out,

This emphasis on abolitionist manipulation of slave narratives suggests the difficulties implicit in the project of historical recovery, as even the first-person documents of ex-slaves were written under severe constraints and therefore cannot be fully trusted to reveal the authenticity of slave experience. (339)

Furthermore, neo-slave narratives made certain deductions when describing the realities of slavery to their predominantly White audience. Morrison in particular has reflected on how this restraint in the depiction of brutality has influenced her writing philosophy by saying that

In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, [the authors of slave narratives] were silent about many things, and they “forgot” many other things. . . . My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic. (“The Site of Memory” 91)

This “ripping of the veil” represents America’s reckoning with its difficult racial past – or rather, a lack of thereof. Morrison herself names the state of America’s collective memory on the topic of slavery the “national amnesia” and describes her predictions for *Beloved* by saying: “I thought this is got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember” (qtd. in Zauditu-Selassie 148). Thus, *Beloved*, as all neo-slave narratives, arises from a need to not just discover but also fully acknowledge the subject of this “amnesia” – to give voice to issues both African Americans and American society as a whole have left unsaid. Moreover, neo-slave narratives take on the task of narrating “the very chapter of American history it had long lacked: the story of the African Americans who survived slavery” (Rody 93). Much of early African American history has, as Anim-Addo and Lima summarize, become “irretrievable” (2). The majority of it has not been preserved in forms which would be recognized as legitimate historical evidence – namely, it has not been written down. Thus,

In an effort to incorporate the perspectives of slaves on their own experience, historians began to turn to folklore, oral tradition, antebellum fugitive slave narratives, and Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves, and for the first time in the academic study of slavery the first-person testimony of slaves was accepted as legitimate historical evidence. (Dubey 333)

Neo-slave narratives contribute to the recovery of African American history by combining elements of this “alternate” history with the narrative form in order to explore the inner lives

of the enslaved. This often requires the added use of fiction, since “memories and recollections won’t give [the author] total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help” (Morrison, “The Site” 92). Paradoxically, the “act of imagination,” the addition of the factually unreal, has the most profound effect on the reader because “In such an approach to retelling history, one is forced to relive the past by becoming immersed in it” (Anim-Addo and Lima 2). With all of these elements combined, the neo-slave narrative “repeatedly underscores slavery’s silences by replaying them, calling attention to what has not been said” (Reinhardt 117), forcing its readers to acknowledge and accept the suppressed past.

## 1.2. Narrating Memory and the Concept of “Rememory”

Narrating memory is an act of both reconstruction and imagination as memory itself is not a static, unchanging phenomenon waiting to be rediscovered: “Memory does not record the past directly, rather it (re)constructs past experiences” (Abdullah 14), which, in turn, makes recounting and processing the suppressed past a complex, multilayered process. Thus, memory functions as an innately subjective and dynamic interpretation “of events and experiences, constructed and continually reconstructed to a great extent by human imagination” (Lonien 18). Morrison terms this dynamic of memory “rememory.” On the level of an individual, “rememory” represents the revisiting of previous experiences, especially the traumatic events which the brain has repressed, in order to incorporate them into current consciousness. As these instances could not be properly processed at the time of their happening, the person who experienced them must revisit them later in order to healthily incorporate them into their current emotional reality. In this instance, the prefix “re-” signifies the repetition of remembrance, an active engagement with the past rather than “an abstract factual recital” (Krumholz 404). Throughout this process, old memories are given new meanings:

Memory creates the significance of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall. . . . It is in the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, that events are lifted out of time to be resituated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance. (Olney 47-48)

A similar pattern is seen on the collective level, where memory can be defined as “a dynamic social process of reconfiguration, and outright invention . . . a social and cultural construct, rather than a biological or a mental activity” (Roberts and Roberts 17). In this context,

[T]o “rememory” is to use one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past. “Rememory” thus functions in Morrison’s “history” as a trope for the problem of reimagining one’s heritage. . . . The characters who do not want to or can not remember their stories reverse the desire of the writer who wants to know and tell a communal history. She must work to “rememory” these ancestors who wish they could forget. In the absence of their particular faces, she must create the characters she wants to mourn. The elevation of memory to a supernatural power that connects all minds . . . is generated by authorial desire to write like a “we” about unknown ancestors. (Rody 101)

### 1.3. The Repressed Trauma in *Beloved*

One of the central themes of *Beloved* is the repression of traumatic memories – both by individual characters and African American community as a whole. Morrison uses individual character stories to paint a picture of a wider cultural devastation. The novel opens to a spiteful house, “full of baby’s venom” (Morrison, *Beloved* 5), but, as one of the characters, Baby Suggs points out, “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby” (Morrison, *Beloved* 7). The particular ghost that haunts the family living in that house, at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1873, is the embodiment of slavery’s ability and intention to push its subjects beyond every limit of suffering. This ghost is impersonated by the unnamed baby girl Sethe, her mother, had killed when the Schoolteacher, who owned and abused her, came to take her and her children back to the plantation they had escaped from. The murder of the baby girl, who was later called Beloved, is the central event of the narrative. Her return from the dead and eventual exorcism marks a reckoning and processing – or, to put it in Morrison’s words, remembering – of both the incident and the years of abuse which had led to it.

Each character in *Beloved* is an example of a particular kind of trauma commonly faced by the newly freed African Americans. To begin, the novel continuously highlights the commodification and abuse of Black bodies both under slavery and after its abolition. Their poor living conditions and harsh work are a constant backdrop to all the stories told about Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky the protagonists used to be enslaved on. Sethe describes how her husband, Halle, and she could only see each other in daylight on Sundays because they both worked from dawn until dusk the rest of the week. Even then, Halle took on extra work on his one day of rest in order to earn money to buy his mother’s freedom. Still, Garner is depicted as a lenient master, and the slaves at Sweet Home had lived far better than most in the same condition until Sweet Home was taken over by Schoolteacher in 1853. It is Schoolteacher’s harsh treatment what finally pushes the slaves at Sweet Home to attempt an escape North – and once it fails, the consequences are brutal. As Paul D describes, “One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me. The last of the Sweet Home men” (Morrison, *Beloved* 82). Yet, his path takes Paul D to an even worse place – the prison in Alfred, Georgia, where he spends months “trembling in a box built into the ground. Grateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands” (Morrison, *Beloved* 48). Describing the dreadful psychological impact of his imprisonment, Paul D reveals: “The box

had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind” (Morrison, *Beloved* 48).

“Going crazy” is one of the major consequences of life in bondage. As Sethe explains, “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (Morrison, *Beloved* 269). Paul D’s and Sethe’s experiences correspond to Nell Irwin Painter’s term “soul murder,” which refers to the psychological effects of the profound abuse African Americans endured within American slave society. “Soul murder” is a term which first appeared in children’s psychology as a

dramatic designation for a certain category of traumatic experiences – those instances of repetitive and chronic overstimulation alternating with emotional deprivation that are deliberately brought about by another individual. . . . [E]motional deprivation alternating with abuse of children has lasting and profound effect – mobilizing certain defenses and structural changes, most of which tend to interfere with full, free emotional and intellectual development, and modifying the primal fantasies that motivate human behavior. (Shengold 533-44)

According to Shengold, this definition also perfectly fits into the framework of the slave society because “soul murder is a crime characterized by man’s inhumanity to man. One man uses his power over another to crush his individuality, his dignity, his capacity to feel deeply” (536). It causes many, like Paul D, to go deeply numb, going through the motions of life automatically and without too much thought out of fear of the memories those thoughts might trigger:

After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things – with a little work and a little sex thrown in – he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle’s face and Sixo laughing. (Morrison, *Beloved* 48)

His mind remains in the fight-or-flight state, focused on survival and unable to spare any strength for growth or healing. Sethe is in a similar predicament – the fierceness with which she protects her children is reflective of the fact that she is suspecting danger behind every corner. Perhaps the most thoroughly “murdered soul” of the novel is Baby Suggs, who for a brief moment became “holy” (Morrison, *Beloved* 98), her house full of friends, neighbors,



fellow worshipers, and her own grandchildren. Still, she could not stop Schoolteacher. According to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, all fugitive slaves had to be returned to their owners if captured. Thus, twenty-eight days after Sethe's arrival, the Schoolteacher tracks her and her children down, and comes to 124 to collect his property. In the culmination of years of abuse and trauma, Sethe grabs her children and takes them to a woodshed, attempting to save them from slavery by killing them with a handsaw. However, she only kills the unnamed baby girl before she is overpowered and arrested. Afterwards, Sethe displays a stoic demeanor during the trial and upon her return home, which the Black community interprets as "uncalled-for pride" (Morrison, *Beloved* 151), shunning her and the whole household, including Baby Suggs. In a cruel twist of irony, after a brief taste of freedom, Baby Suggs experiences the horror of trauma again:

After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, exchanged it, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not – to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. . . . The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last. (Morrison, *Beloved* 190-94)

There are many mentions of other characters suffering psychologically due to their time in bondage, including "Baby Suggs' friend, a young woman in a bonnet whose food was full of tears," "Aunt Phyllis, who slept with her eyes wide open," and "Jackson Till, who slept under the bed" (Morrison, *Beloved* 110). Stamp Paid summarizes this psychological malaise the best: "Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread" (Morrison, *Beloved* 217).

Sethe is the one carrying the most prominent mark of such a cruel life – the chokecherry tree on her back, planted by the Schoolteacher's whip after she was caught

trying to escape. The whipping of the heavily pregnant Sethe and her birthing Denver in a boat on the Ohio is one of many instances where Morrison depicts how especially cruel slavery was for women. While their everyday tasks are not any different than those of their male counterparts, Sethe and Baby Suggs are shown burdening the extra weight of childrearing and pain of the inevitable separation from their children. Sethe is expected to choose a “husband” at only fifteen because enslaved women were expected to start having children as soon as they reached the childbearing age, and to have as many as they could. However, these children were primarily their master’s goods, and were thus routinely separated from their mothers. The character best embodying the archetype of the suffering enslaved mother is Baby Suggs, who describes how

all of [her] life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. . . . What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her – only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. “God take what He would,” she said. And He did, and He did, and He did. . . . (Morrison, *Beloved* 28)

Sethe’s assault, which again demonstrates that commodification of Black slave bodies went hand in hand with their physical and psychological degradation, is far from the only one depicted in the novel. The rape of African American women by their White masters is a common element in both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives; yet, *Beloved* explores the morbid versatility of sexual abuse by presenting it in forms often not taken into consideration. The forced breastfeeding of Schoolteacher’s pupils by Sethe is one of them. The incident is deeply traumatizing not only as a violation of Sethe’s bodily autonomy but also as a representation of her inability to mother her children under slavery. When recounting the event to Paul D, her main qualm is not her own pain but the fact that “They took my milk!” (Morrison, *Beloved* 21), which she had to get to her children in Cincinnati. Another character whose sexual trauma is closely connected with motherhood is Baby Suggs, who almost offhandedly mentions how Garner “Never brought [one of the Pauls] to her cabin with

directions to ‘lay down with her,’ like they did in Carolina” (Morrison, *Beloved* 154). Throughout her lifetime, Baby Suggs had, like most enslaved women, been coerced into having sexual relations with men of her masters’ choosing in order to produce offspring for them. This should in fact be understood as an assault on both herself and her partners since neither had any choice in the matter. Indeed, *Beloved* undermines gender expectations by depicting men as victims of rape as well as women. The only character who suffers sexual abuse in a more commonly understood sense, by being forced to perform a sexual act under immediate threat of violence, is Paul D. In a brief glimpse of the horrors of the prison in Alfred, he describes how the guards would further humiliate the prisoners by making the whole line kneel and choosing a few of them to perform oral sex on the guards, to which “Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus” (Morrison, *Beloved* 121). There are more instances of sexual abuse mentioned throughout the novel – Stamp Paid’s wife being coerced into sleeping with a young White master and Ella, who “had been beaten every way but down” (Morrison, *Beloved* 278) after spending her puberty “in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called ‘the lowest yet’ . . . who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities” (Morrison, *Beloved* 278). Overall, the novel uses many individual character stories to depict just how effective of a tool sexual assault was in dehumanizing and psychologically repressing African Americans. The great trauma dealt to the African American community has been fractured into thousands of pieces of individual stories of pain, but, when put together, they all echo the same message – the issue is much bigger than just one person. Since the wound was inflicted to the whole community, the community has to come together in order to heal it – *Beloved* attempts to be one of the ways to begin this healing process.

#### 1.4. (Re)constructing the Fractured Identity

Since the institution of slavery relied on the full submission of its Black subjects, upholding the system required their complete dehumanization. As a result, the constant abuse and disregard for the slaves' bodily autonomy and mental wellbeing stunted any chance of creating a stable sense of self in most of them. The best depiction of the state of mind caused by such a treatment is given by Paul D, when he describes feeling lower than the rooster Mister, because

Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (Morrison, *Beloved* 83)

After the abolition of slavery, the newly freed African Americans found themselves in a unique position. In addition to their troubling history, the greatest challenge they faced was a lack of identity. They had to build both their individual and cultural identity virtually from nothing, which proved to be no easy task. As Sethe put it, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison, *Beloved* 108). There is a singular character perfectly embodying the cultural journey of the whole community – Baby Suggs. After a lifetime of bondage has completely wrecked her physically and emotionally, Halle, her only remaining child, buys her freedom from the Garners "so she could sit down for a change (Morrison, *Beloved* 154). Yet, when she crosses the Ohio into freedom, Baby Suggs realizes she is a blank slate:

. . . for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me? (Morrison, *Beloved* 154)

After sixty years of being nameless, Baby Suggs is informed that her legal name, according to her sales ticket, is Jenny Whitlow. However, she quickly renames herself after the man she

once claimed as her husband – taking his last name and using the endearment “baby” as her first name. From the beginning of her free life, Baby Suggs is fiercely focused on the newly formed Black community, deciding that “because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once,” becoming “Baby Suggs, holy” (Morrison, *Beloved* 98). Through her, Morrison embodies the coming together of different parts which form the African American identity as we know it today – the African spiritual traditions, Christian influences, and the traumatic past in need of healing. On one hand, “Baby Suggs, according to Morrison, was born in Africa” (Zauditu-Selassie 159), and, by taking up the mantle of the spiritual leader, she takes the place of the novel’s African ancestor, ensuring cultural survival by passing down knowledge and rituals slavery has failed to erase. On the other hand, she is also a Christ figure who multiplies food for the feast in 124 and goes from church to church as a preacher. Her rituals at the Clearing unite the pre-slavery African traditions, such as the use of singing and dance in the ceremony, and the new Christianized ones – namely, the form of a sermon, in order to facilitate healing and growth of the community. They insist on self-love, and urge the attendees to claim themselves as fully free people, instructing them that “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard” (Morrison, *Beloved* 100). Through these rituals, Baby Suggs creates a place where the community can gather, and reinforce their group identity and social bonds while also reaching spiritual fulfillment and emotional catharsis. This has a two-fold effect as it strengthens individual members of the community by giving them a support system and a sense of belonging, while also strengthening the community by creating social cohesion and initiating new members. Thus, Baby Suggs’s personal identity arc is inseparable from that of the community, serving as a case-study in the creation of African American identity while also highlighting how intertwined individual identity quests are with the communal one.

In addition, *Beloved* also depicts the lack of African American communal history and identity through characters’ constant lack of family. Sociologically speaking, families make up the very core of society. They are the social units into which new members of society are born and introduced to shared values and modes of behavior while being nourished by their caretakers. A family is the individual’s first world, a safe haven in which they gain a form of reference they will use for the rest of their life. However, families do not exist in isolation. On the contrary, they are greatly influenced by societal circumstances of the time and place in which they exist. Likewise, the broken families depicted in Morrison’s novel come to

represent a microcosmos of the issues faced by the larger African American community. Chronologically, the first pseudo-family of the novel is formed at Sweet Home by the four Pauls, Sixo, Halle, Baby Suggs, and later Sethe and her children. Existing under slavery, it can only ever be a pseudo-family, serving as an example of how the “peculiar institution”<sup>1</sup> would not allow its subjects to form significant interpersonal connections. In the place where freedom is defined as the ability “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire” (Morrison, *Beloved* 177), any attachment becomes a liability for someone who is a slave. Anything and anyone they love may be taken away at any moment, so

you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. . . . Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother – a big love like that would split you wide open. . . . (Morrison, *Beloved* 177)

The novel depicts how, even post-slavery, most families survived only in scraps of a few people here and there. In the aftermath of the Civil War, “Odd clusters and strays of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenectady to Jackson. . . . configurations and blends of families of women and children, while elsewhere, solitary, hunted and hunting for, were men, men, men” (Morrison, *Beloved* 60-61). The first chapter of the novel opens to a scene of a household depleted of most of its members. Halle never made it out of Kentucky, and though Baby Suggs tried to track down her children, “the news they dug up was so pitiful she quit” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163). Later on, following Baby Suggs’s death, Sethe’s baby girl having been killed and her sons, Howard and Buglar, having run away, Sethe and Denver are left completely isolated from the world at large. Describing Sethe’s estrangement from her children and her stigmatization in the Cincinnati Black community for murdering her baby, Denver reveals: “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 223). In other words, Sethe is prevented from forming proper familial and communal bonds both during her enslavement and after it. The fractured relationship between mothers and their children is not only emblematic of the characters’ struggle for cultural identity and heritage but is also one of the main sources of (residual) trauma in the novel. Baby Suggs loses seven children before she gets to raise Halle: “The last

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<sup>1</sup> The term “peculiar institution” became a euphemism for the slavery in the South in 1830.

of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway" (Morrison, *Beloved* 153). While Sethe has the rare chance to keep all of her children with her in Sweet Home, she can only realize the full potential of her love for them once they escape it. Reinforcing the novel's claim that freedom equals the ability to love full heartedly, she tells Paul D: "Look like I loved 'em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love 'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to" (Morrison, *Beloved* 177). Sethe herself remembers little of her life before Sweet Home. When Beloved asks her about her mother, Sethe recalls: "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo" (Morrison, *Beloved* 70), recalling only the scar branded onto her mother's chest. As Lonien maintains, "Sethe's loss of self and fragmentation of identity is rooted in the disconnection from her mother, leaving her psychologically wounded and prone to displacing her own self as a result" (34). Sethe's maternal deprivation also explains her fierce reaction to Schoolteacher's appearance as well as her need to prevent him from taking her children no matter what. She places her entire sense of self-worth in her children – they are her "best thing" (Morrison, *Beloved* 269), and she does not see herself as having any intrinsic value outside of them. As Otten explains, it is "the perverse power of a slave system engendered by capitalistic greed that transfigures mother love into a potential weapon of unqualified expression, a love that can burn a son to death, or slit a baby daughter's throat – acts of appalling horror born of mercy" (92).

However, Sethe is also a character that most clearly points at the connection between motherhood and cultural heritage. The few recollections she does have of her life before Sweet Home are brought up as she takes on a motherly role. Whilst running North, she refers to the child in her womb as "the little antelope" (Morrison, *Beloved* 35), wondering how she thought of that without ever seeing the animal. Her conclusion is that

it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. . . . Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance. . . . Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. (Morrison, *Beloved* 35)

Later on, when answering Beloved's inquiry, Sethe is flooded by the memories of her former wet-nurse, Nan, who is the crucial clue to discovering Sethe's heritage. Nan's amputated

hand heavily implies she had been taken from the Belgian Congo, and since she made the voyage through the Middle Passage on the same ship as Sethe's mother, it can be assumed Congo is where Sethe's bloodline also originates from. Nan also passes on crucial information about Sethe's personal history, namely the fact that she is a product of a consensual union: "The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around" (Morrison, *Beloved* 72). By providing breastmilk, the established symbol of a mother's care for her children, and the story of Sethe's origin, Nan takes on the role of a mother who is both the caregiver and the giver of identity and meaning. In turn, the memory of her is only triggered when Sethe's daughter, or the living ghost of her, asks about the woman who would be her grandmother. In other words, through motherhood, Sethe herself becomes a link in the genealogical chain ensuring cultural and communal continuation. Still, this chain has been broken in many places. Sethe has lost a link to her past – "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back" (Morrison, *Beloved* 71). She loses the link to the future when she takes a handsaw to her children – an act which kills one, and keeps the rest living in fear of her. If the mothers of the novel are the givers of identity, a solid point of reference for their children's personal development, then the chronic absence of mothering can only result in alienation and displacement, once again demonstrating that (former) slaves' lack any meaningful foundation for (re)constructing their sense of self.

While exposing this sense of alienation, Morrison's novel also seeks to amend it by reaching back in time and retrieving the nameless ancestors from oblivion. According to Rody, *Beloved* functions as a "mother-quest" on two levels, with the characters' desire for their mothers mirroring the author's own search for her unknown foremothers (105). Throughout her novel, "Morrison dramatizes the black literary daughter's imaginative return to maternal history. . . . And though the plot turns upon the loss of a child, this history-as-daughter's-rememory is pervaded with grief for lost mothers" (Rody 106). Both the pain and the significance of the characters' maternal history are embodied in the motif of scars, central to the exploration of motherhood in the novel. Sethe can only recognize her mother by the brand on her chest, while she herself suffers a "chokecherry tree" on her back as a punishment for securing a better life for her children. *Beloved* comes back from the dead bearing the scars of her mother's deadly love – three lines on her forehead and the marks of a handsaw around her neck. Thus, the scars inflicted upon the Black women of *Beloved*



function both as proof of great pain and the bearers of memory. When Sethe's mother shows Sethe her scar, Sethe does not recoil – her first concern is: “But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too” (Morrison, *Beloved* 70). And “though Sethe's mother slapped her, Morrison's portrayal of the lost mothers of African American history inscribes, indelibly, the daughter's reckless willingness to bear the mark of the mother's pain” (Rody 107) into the narrative. Thus, Morrison's “mother quest” (Rody 105) embodies the African American search for ancestry in the image of the scarred body of a Black woman, postulating the indelibility of hidden history, as well as the pain one must relive in order to retrieve it.

## 1.5. Trauma and “Rememory”

As already stated, of the central themes in *Beloved* is that of repressed trauma and its “rememory.” According to Caruth, psychological trauma can most effectively be described as a mind-wound that is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). Traumatic experiences are not encoded into memory the same way as the non-traumatic ones: “Being so categorically different from the experiential context of ‘normal’ life, the traumatic event defies comprehension, recounting and mastery” (Lonien 19). As Abdullah argues, “the primary nature of trauma is associated with the inability of the victim’s mind to incorporate the painful experience into ordinary consciousness” (11). Rather, the traumatic memories are stored in an “alternate stream of consciousness” (Lonien 19), isolated from the rest of the mind as a defense mechanism, resurfacing only during reenactments of the traumatic event. This is depicted in the characters’ constant avoidance of thinking about the past. Sethe admits she “worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (Morrison, *Beloved* 8), while Paul D has a very specific image representing his repression of memory – “that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (Morrison, *Beloved* 88). Baby Suggs makes a valiant attempt at facing the community’s trauma, but she is defeated by Schoolteacher’s arrival, and her zeal for life is replaced by a bone-deep apathy towards it. She gives up both “the Word” (Morrison, *Beloved* 191) and the world, retiring to bed to contemplate color in order to “fix on something harmless in this world” (Morrison, *Beloved* 192). Overall, none of the characters want to or even have the strength to look back and face the past which haunts them.

### 1.5.1. The Ghost as a Symbol of Trauma

In order to bring the traumatic experience back to life and make “the unspeakable . . . visible, to be able to cry out” (Mohácsi 57), Morrison employs various devices, including the supernatural figure of Beloved, the ghost of a young woman with flawless skin “except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair” (*Beloved* 59) who walks out of a creek completely dressed, and makes her way to 124 to finally meet her mother. Throughout the novel, “Beloved’s identity defies categorization, and she remains, till the very end, the revengeful ghost and at once the innocent victim who is left

alone again” (Mohácsi 129). On one hand, she is at least partially the resurrected ghost of the baby girl who has been haunting 124 for the last eighteen years. While her body has aged in real time, making her come back to life as a woman in her early twenties, *Beloved*’s mind remains frozen at two years old. Her child-like state of mind is made most clear in the sequence following Sethe’s revelation of *Beloved*’s true identity, which uses stream of consciousness to display the intertwining thoughts of women in 124. *Beloved*’s part of the narrative has no punctuation, with sentences flowing into each other, blending together different points of view, as well as the past and the present. It depicts the baby’s inability to differentiate different points in time as well as her inability to separate herself from her mother: “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (Morrison, *Beloved* 227). However, the same sequence reveals that *Beloved* is much more than the murdered child as the jumbled recollections also depict the memories of a person suffering from claustrophobia on a slave-trade ship sailing through the Middle Passage:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine . . . men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes I am not big small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears . . . 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, *Beloved* 228)

Describing the Europeans as “men without skin” is indicative of someone who has never seen a White person, and “the man on my face” implies that the person is on one of the tightly packed slave ships, where people were literally stacked atop one another for the duration of the trip. Furthermore, *Beloved*’s flashbacks contain other memories of uncertain origins, such as the one implying sexual assault: “I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken I am falling like the rain is I watch him eat inside I am crouching to keep from falling with the rain I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces” (Morrison, *Beloved* 229). It is impossible to know who exactly is speaking, but it cannot be the baby who died when she was only two years old.

The crucial clue to *Beloved*’s identity lies in her name. Unlike the rest of Sethe’s children, the baby girl Sethe killed was never given a proper name. The ghost calls herself *Beloved* because those are the words Sethe had had engraved on her gravestone after hearing

the preacher address the “dearly beloved” during the funeral. Thus, “‘Beloved’ names everyone, in the official, impersonal rhetoric of the church and names everyone who is intimately loved, but does not name the forgotten” (Rody 104), letting the readers know that, though the murdered baby may only haunt one house, she is truly everyone’s ghost. She is the daughter Sethe killed trying to “out hurt the hurter” (Morrison, *Beloved* 253) but also a slave remembering the pain and the stench of the Middle Passage, and she stands as a “representative of all children who were transported into enslavement, not by the waters of the Middle Passage alone, but by the wombs of African women – the primary route that delivered enslaved Africans to their principal roles as plantation laborers” (Zauditu-Selassie 159). *Beloved* enters the narrative as

a symbolic compression of innumerable forgotten people into one miraculously resurrected personality, the remembering of the “sixty million” in one youthful body . . . like all the ghosts in literature, she embodies a fearful claim of the past upon the present, the past’s desire to be recognized by, and even possess, the living. (Rody 104)

Her return to the world of the living marks an overdue reckoning with the past the community has been avoiding. *Beloved* becomes flesh, demanding to *be loved*: “Countering traumatic repression, she makes the characters accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, *as beloved*” (Krumholz 400).

### 1.5.2. Storytelling as Healing

Importantly, Morrison does not limit *Beloved* to merely exploring the repressed trauma of the Black community. She also presents a means of coping with it in a way which brings individual and communal healing – storytelling. In many ways, *Beloved* is a story about stories – a novel centered around the characters’ recollections of their past, and their attempt to either forget them completely or pass them on. In the novel meant to represent the long overdue reckoning with history, storytelling becomes a healing ritual because “In order to own the traumatic event, the victim has to ‘re-externalize’ it by articulating the story surrounding it. Only then can the vicious circle of repetition and reenactment of the traumatic event be broken, the victim can internalize it, integrate it into his existing mental framework and move on” (Lonien 20). This is best depicted in Sethe’s story arc, especially in the moment where she finally gains the courage to tell Paul D she killed her daughter. As she sets

to do so, “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask” (Morrison, *Beloved* 178). Since she cannot fully justify what she did even to herself, she cannot internalize the memory. Therefore, she keeps circling around it just like she keeps circling around the story – avoiding the subject but always inevitably coming back to it. Importantly, it is Paul D’s arrival at 124 that triggers Sethe’s recollections, leading her to think that “Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal – not even leave the stove – and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank” (Morrison, *Beloved* 23). Sethe’s reckoning with her traumatic past can only happen once the perfect listener, who had suffered in the same place and at the hands of the same man as herself, comes along. According to Laub,

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of another – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for a long time. (70-71)

Thus, storytelling becomes a way for the individual to process their trauma while also incorporating their story into the greater fabric of communal history. In an attempt to address the larger cultural devastation of the African American community, Morrison employs her novel as a part of the storytelling dynamic, as “In written discourse, the reader becomes both symbolic and actual participant in the storytelling event through shared experience, shared emotional response, and connection made by the communal aspect of the event” (Atkinson 23). Thus, the readers are now obliged to pass the story on – but how they will engage in that task is a question left open. In the end, the novel, paradoxically, claims in form of a metafictional comment that it is “not a story to pass on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 295), leaving the readers with two opposing messages. On one hand, it is up to the storyteller to adapt the story – to discover which parts hold true and which hold them back. Perhaps *Beloved* should be banished from memory once she has been properly dealt with. And yet,

by telling the story, the narrator contradicts herself: she does pass the story on. She and of course Morrison force readers to relive the country’s past horrors and make them participants in the recreation of those horrors. Would it have been better not to pass it on? It had to be passed on. Just as Sethe and Paul D could not pass on their

memories but had to, just as Denver could not enter the world but had to, just as Sethe could not harm her children but had to, so the story could not be passed on, but had to be. (Page 38)

### 1.5.3. Communal Parenting

While the broken families of *Beloved* signify a lack of communal bonds and cultural identity, the novel's numerous substitute families can only represent a cultural rebirth. In numerous instances, Morrison depicts communal parenting as a replacement for the mother's presence. This becomes common practice in the Black community, partially out of necessity produced by the mother's absence, but also because

African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "othermothers," women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (Collins 178)

Morrison's novel depicts many of these "othermothers" as both caregivers and creators of cultural identity. As previously mentioned, Sethe was primarily raised by the wet-nurse Nan, who passes onto her the story of her name and her conception, as well as the "cooing women each of whom was called Ma'am" (Morrison, *Beloved* 36), indicating how all the women at the plantation took care of all the children when they had time. Baby Suggs takes on a maternal role towards many people. Most prominently towards Sethe, best depicted in how tenderly she cares for her when she arrives from Kentucky: "After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen. . . . When Sethe's legs were done, Baby looked at her feet and wiped them lightly. She cleaned between Sethe's legs with two separate pans of hot water and then tied her stomach and vagina with sheets" (Morrison 107). Moreover, Baby Suggs raises Denver in ways Sethe cannot. She instills a sense of self-love into her granddaughter, and Baby's presence in 124 gives Denver a sense of safety she does not receive from her mother. Lastly, Baby Suggs takes on the role of a matriarch of the whole community and becomes a pillar of communal identity who recreates and brings the community together in rituals of solidarity.

Denver is a character with the most "othermothers" in the narrative. When she is forced to face the world outside 124 after eighteen years of isolation, the Black community,

which has shunned her mother for her excessive pride, recognizes they have a responsibility towards the young woman. After finding out about Sethe's "illness," various members of the community take turns providing Denver with food, and, "all through the spring, names appeared near or in gifts of food. Obviously for the return of the pan or plate or basket; but also to let the girl know, if she cared to, who the donor was" (Morrison, *Beloved* 267). By leaving out pieces of paper with their names, the members of the Black community give Denver a chance to enter their circle. In return, by following them, Denver accepts the invitation and makes the effort to meet her neighbors. This back-and-forth process of giving and returning dishes becomes a ritual of initiation for the young woman, whereby the community literally nourishes her through food, while also figuratively nourishing her sense of self by providing her with a sense of belonging and a space for further personal development. Denver starts taking lessons with Lady Jones again, eventually gaining financial independence by getting a job. In a way, she takes over the motherly role from Sethe, who is too deeply engaged in a toxic cycle with *Beloved* to take care of either herself or Denver. Accepted and encouraged by her community, Denver goes from being too agoraphobic to leave 124 to potentially going to college and seemingly starting a courtship with Nelson Lord, implying she will one day start her own family. Though motherhood depicted in *Beloved* is a site of great pain and displacement, it also becomes a site of hope and rebirth through alternative forms of mothering and the creation of new families. Through its depiction of African American families, the novel takes on a two-fold role, acknowledging and mourning the losses of the past, while also looking forward, willingly choosing to focus on the community's resilience and new beginnings ahead.

#### **1.5.4. Exorcism as a Healing Ritual**

However, the same community which embraces Denver is the one which resented Sethe for her pride and Baby Suggs for her abundance. The events at 124 are partially their fault because, in their jealousy, nobody came to warn Baby Suggs that the schoolteacher was coming: "The community circle is thus two-edged: supportive and necessary, yet divisive and petty" (Page 32), but Morrison gives it a chance to step up, making an appeal for "solidarity within and across collective identity structures" (Otten 99). This solidarity is then achieved when thirty women arrive at 124 to rid it of its ghostly infestation. While *Beloved*'s presence is a necessary part of individual and communal healing, "a difficult emotional crossing is made when the text acknowledges that the murdered innocent, the forgotten past, can

become, if allowed to return and take over our present-day households, a killer” (Rody 112). Even before her resurrection, *Beloved*’s presence in 124 effectively isolates its inhabitants from the rest of the world. It latches onto Howard and Bugler until they leave the house, and, as Denver puts it, “Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by” (Morrison, *Beloved* 19). Now that she is made flesh, *Beloved* wants Sethe with all the greed a two-year old has for her mother. The egocentrism and the fixation on a maternal figure, normal for young children, become a calamity of horrendous proportions when allowed to continue into adulthood. Once Sethe realizes the mysterious girl with no lines on her hands (Morrison, *Beloved* 273) is her resurrected daughter, she loses all interest in the world outside 124. She interprets the return of her daughter as a chance to redeem herself to her but also as an excuse to give up her struggle with her past, saying: “I don’t have to remember nothing” (Morrison, *Beloved* 198). Soon, she and the ghost girl become trapped in a toxic loop, with Sethe offering constant justifications and *Beloved* refusing them, “Uncomprehending everything except that Sethe was the woman who took her face away, leaving her crouching in a dark, dark place, forgetting to smile” (Morrison, *Beloved* 270). As Denver describes, “even when *Beloved* was quiet, dreamy, minding her own business, Sethe got her going again. . . . It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And *Beloved* helped her out” (Morrison, *Beloved* 270). Now that *Beloved* has been summoned, the past must be purged – but it is too much for one person to do. Importantly, it is Ella who finally puts her foot down about something being done. Where she once judged Sethe as “prideful, misdirected, and . . . too complicated” (Morrison, *Beloved* 275), now she decides that “Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. . . . The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (*Beloved* 276). It is heavily implied Ella has engaged in a crime similar to that of Sethe by refusing to nurse the child she bore to “the lowest yet,” causing it to die five days after birth (Morrison, *Beloved* 278), an act which is, in turn, similar to what Sethe’s mother did when she “threw away” all the children forced upon her by sexual assault. As Rushdy points out, “By placing such a frame around Sethe’s story, Morrison insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment – the wrongness of assuming a transhistorical ethic outside a particular historical moment” (“Daughters” 577). When thirty women approach 124, they come equipped for an exorcism: “Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others



brought Christian faith – as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both” (277). Yet, their emotion soon outgrows institutionalized religion, returning to something more primal as “Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (Morrison, *Beloved* 278). As their cries draw Beloved and Sethe out, Sethe finally completes her healing journey through the reenactment of the traumatic event. She mistakes Edward Bodwin, who is coming down the Bluestone Road to pick up Denver for her first day at work, for Schoolteacher coming to take her children. In the reversal of the scene which played out eighteen years ago, Sethe is able to protect her children the “right” way, by attacking the threat rather than them. Thinking that “he is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing” (Morrison, *Beloved* 281), Sethe flings herself at Bodwin wielding an icepick, with Denver hot at her heels trying to stop her. In the time it takes Denver to catch up with Sethe, and Ella to “put her fist in her jaw” (Morrison, *Beloved* 285), Beloved disappears. The way in which she does it is left unclear. When Paul D inquires if she is truly done, Stamp Paid tells him she “Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes. Ella is not so sure. ‘Maybe,’ she says, ‘maybe not. Could be hiding in the trees waiting for another chance’” (Morrison, *Beloved* 285). As previously mentioned, Beloved is much more than Sethe’s murdered daughter. She is the ghost of the whole African American community, the cultural trauma brought upon by slavery that the newly freed have not yet addressed. By banishing Beloved, the community completes all the steps necessary to heal their trauma – the repressed past has been acknowledged, re-lived, and must now let go in order for life to move on. As Rushdy contends,

The novel is, finally, about putting stories together and putting them to rest. Putting to rest, of course, for Morrison means giving renewed and energetic life. From this rest, she gives her characters resurrection. In the end, perhaps the greatest achievement of Morrison’s novel is that she gives the murdered victim of history voice; she resurrects the unjustly killed and allows that daughter to have renewed historical life by criticizing the sort of history that has hitherto excluded her and her rebellious spirit. (“Daughters” 592)

### 1.5.5. Denver Representing the Future

Yet, *Beloved* is only one of the two daughters inhabiting 124. If *Beloved* represents the past, Denver is “the daughter of history” (Rushdy, “Daughters” 571) – the first generation never to know slavery, who is holding onto her history with one hand, while reaching into the future with the other. Rushdy postulates that Denver is “the most important character in Morrison’s revisionist strategy” (“Daughters” 571), standing as “the site of hope” (571) and representing “the embracing glance, the loving view, the need to remember” (578). Though she has not been personally victimized by slavery, Denver inherits its consequences as a part of her family history. She was too young to remember the baby girl’s murder, but she has also lived her whole life in the house haunted by the ghost of her sister. The combination of her mother’s overprotectiveness and her own fear of what she might learn outside of the walls of 124 leads Denver to completely isolate herself from the world outside her home. This significantly limits her chances for personal development, leaving her somewhat emotionally stunted when the novel catches up with her at age eighteen. Thus, *Beloved*’s presence serves two purposes for Denver’s story arc. On one hand, Denver’s relationship with her ghostly sister is emblematic of her struggle with her difficult heritage. Like Sethe, Denver cannot face the events which took place in the woodshed on that fateful day. When Nelson Lord asks “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” Denver goes “deaf rather than hear the answer” (Morrison, *Beloved* 118), remaining that way until she hears the baby ghost climbing the stairs to the upper floor. More importantly, *Beloved* facilitates a better understanding between Sethe and Denver by making Denver reconsider her understanding of her family’s past and her mother’s actions. At first, Denver sees the story of Sethe’s escape north only as her personal origin story, and thus “she loved it because it was all about herself; but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 88). But through the endless retellings *Beloved* demands, Denver begins to see it from a different perspective:

. . . there is this nineteen-year-old slave girl – a year older than her self – walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. . . . Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly, mossy teeth. . . . Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. (Morrison, *Beloved* 88)

Later, when Beloved takes over the house, Denver gets to hear Sethe's reasoning from her own mouth:

Although Sethe thinks she is attempting to convince only one daughter of her love, in reality she is convincing the other daughter too. . . . Denver has since understood that because of a larger communal history, her mother's deed might not be so heinous as she had at first thought. . . . Slavery, Beloved is saying in a lower frequency, is the thing to blame. Denver will have to learn to listen to that lower frequency. (Rushdy, "Daughters" 581-83)

The scene pivotal for understanding Denver's character is the moment when she stands on the threshold of 124, trying to gain courage to finally enter the greater world, with her position at the threshold signifying she is now in a transitional state. On one hand, she is paralyzed by fear at the idea of entering a White-dominated world, the world which has hurt and destroyed her family, and which still treats African Americans as lower class of humans. On the other, she is desperate to get help for her mother and knows she is the only one who can do it. Then she hears her grandmother's voice:

Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my." (*Beloved* 261-62)

When Denver responds, "But you said there was no defense," Baby Suggs delivers her final message to both Denver and the readers – "There ain't. . . . Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 261-62). And so, she does – informed, but no longer limited by her history, and encouraged by the strength of her ancestors, Denver leaves and thrives. Denver and Beloved come to stand as the two sides of the same ancestry quest, embodying the author's own negotiation with her communal history. While Beloved represents the daughter's desperate search for her erased ancestors, Denver stands representative of her struggle with the future, providing the answer to the question: how to live and honor such a tragic legacy without letting it overpower you. Just as she took both her mother's milk and her sister's blood in one gulp as a baby, Denver accepts both the difficult and the encouraging side of her heritage, choosing to look forward and progress.

### 1.5.6. New Families

In the end, the message of hope is also echoed in the last scene of the novel. After generations of families separated by slavery, the novel ends with a new family being formed at 124. After losing her daughter for the second time, the defeated Sethe takes to bed to “contemplate color” just like Baby Suggs had done, and Paul D comes back to 124 in “the reverse route of his going” (Morrison, *Beloved* 283). After years of thinking “that to eat, walk and sleep anywhere was life as good as it got” (Morrison, *Beloved* 290), Paul D decides “He wants to put his story next to hers” (Morrison, *Beloved* 294), showing he no longer needs to guard himself by “loving small” (Morrison, *Beloved* 177). Initiating the same ritual of washing Sethe’s tired body and rubbing her feet that Baby Suggs had performed when Sethe first entered 124, Paul D marks a new life beginning in the house. He urges Sethe to live, telling her: “. . . me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Morrison, *Beloved* 294). As Rody explains, “The exchange between these two, developing from shared confessions to an actual romantic ending, gestures at a further transformation: the reconstitution of the black family after a time of devastation” (103). Even though Sethe cannot believe Paul D’s claim of being her own best thing, ending the chapter with a bewildered “Me? Me?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 294), Morrison leads the readers to believe she will not succumb to her sickbed. The end is, paradoxically, marked by numerous new beginnings as Sethe and Paul D start their new life together, Sethe deploys on the journey of self-discovery, and Denver steps into a promising adulthood. Denver’s personal development and the budding courtship with Nelson hint at the idea that she will someday continue the family line by having her own children – and she will never have to worry about someone knocking her down in front of them (Morrison, *Beloved* 153). The future, Morrison concludes, is bright, now that the darkness has been chased away.

## 2. *Tracks*

### 2.1. The Collective Trauma in *Tracks*

Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*, published in 1988, follows a cast of Chippewa characters living on a reservation in North Dakota as they struggle to survive and keep their land in the time span between 1912 and 1924.<sup>2</sup> Though the characters of *Tracks* are fictional, the events of the novel are grounded in recorded historical facts and informed by Erdrich's own experience as a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. Erdrich utilizes the novel to explore the wider cultural devastation the Chippewa had suffered under the Colonial Project. The novel opens with a scene of annihilation, as recalled by Nanapush, one of the narrators:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. . . . we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all of the Anishinabe that the earth could hold and bury. But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared when, along with the first bitter punishments of early winter, a new sickness swept down. (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1-2)

The sickness he is referring to is the 1912 outbreak of tuberculosis, exemplary of numerous outbreaks of Europe-originated diseases which decimated the tribes of the Great Plains at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The high mortality rate, which leaves both Fleur and Nanapush the sole survivors of their respective families, mirrors the real-life experience of the Anishinaabe in that period, when whole families would die overnight (Kolodny qtd. in Runtić and Knežević 75, translation my own). This massive loss of life was greatly aided by the starvation and poverty the community faced due the economic crisis and the ecological catastrophe caused by the White settlers. The near extinction of the buffalo due to overhunting and “the overexploitation of the soil, overhunting, and deforestation” motivated by capitalistic greed led to “drastic changes in the ecosystem, disappearance of many animal and plant species, and the irreversible destruction of the soil” (Cronon qtd. in Runtić and Knežević 76, translation my own). In turn, the traditional

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<sup>2</sup> Chippewa is one of the largest North American Indigenous groups. Traditionally, they called themselves Anishinaabe (Anishnawbe/Anishinaubae). Another term denoting the Anishinaabe is Ojibwe (Ojibwa/Ojibway). In this paper, these terms will sometimes be used interchangeably, as they are in the novel.

Chippewa way of life became irreversibly destroyed, as well. The tribes of the Great Plains centered their whole lifestyle around the buffalo, living a nomadic lifestyle by following buffalo herds across the expanse of the Great Plains. With the near extinction of the buffalo and the loss of most of their land in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these tribes were forced to “assume a capitalist and proprietary relationship with property” (Blansett 161), which permanently destabilized their traditional way of life and the overall social structure. To facilitate this transition, the U.S. government “passed a number of regulations encouraging the transformation of the Native Americans into farmers and the turning of the tribal land from collective into individual property” under the guise of “civilizing” the Anishinaabe (Runtić and Knežević 76, translation my own). The most infamous of these regulations was the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act. It separated the tribal land into plots of land consisting of 65 acres, assigning each plot to a Native family while adding 32 acres per every member older than eighteen and assigning the leftover land to White settlers. However, the land the Anishinaabe received was virtually unfarmable, and they soon found themselves falling into debt due to the inability to cover their living expenses or pay the newly imposed taxes on their land. As a result, the land of the bankrupt Anishinaabe was offered for sale to the White settlers. The Turtle Mountain Chippewa were soon put in an even worse position by the McCumber Agreement of 1882, through which the government stripped them of a large portion of their land. The Agreement later became known as the Ten Cent Treaty, as the tribe was paid one million dollars for four million acres of land, equating only ten cents per acre (Ferris).

With all of these elements combined, *Tracks* opens with a description of a community standing face to face with its utter destruction. Nanapush begins his narration with a short exposition summarizing all the ills which have befallen his people:

Our tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among us were taken. . . . And after, although I had lived no more than fifty winters, I was considered an old man. I'd seen enough to be one. In the years I'd passed, I saw more change than in a hundred upon a hundred before. My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (Erdrich, *Tracks* 2)

The Pillager he is referring to is Fleur, the central figure of the novel, endowed with mystical powers given to her by her familial heritage and the lake monster Misshepesu. After Nanapush saves her from freezing to death next to her dead family, Fleur refuses to let her ancestral land be “sold and measured” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 8) and goes to live alone at Lake Matchimanito. She briefly leaves to find work in Argus, where she meets Pauline Puyat, the second, far less sympathetic narrator of the novel. After coming back to the reservation, Fleur starts a family with Eli Kashpaw, birthing a daughter Lulu. Soon, the three of them, Nanapush, and Eli’s mother, Margaret, come to form a reluctant family at Lake Matchimanito, with Pauline fading in and out of the frame of their life. Throughout their narration, both Nanapush and Pauline depict the family’s constant economic hardship as they try and fail to secure a living and raise money to pay off the allotment on their land. Fleur leaves for Argus in 1913, where she makes enough money to secure ownership of her land by working as a butcher. However, though the work proves lucrative, the consequences she suffers for entering the White-dominated world are severe. Her physical strength and skill at poker enrage the men she works with, and they rape her in retaliation. The event is followed by a tornado, and the men freeze to death after getting trapped in a meat locker, after which Fleur seemingly learns her lesson, returning to Matchimanito and staying there until she is forced out. After her union with Eli, the whole family contributes to raising money. Margaret is constantly making preserves in order to save every scrap of food, and she also makes fish powder to sell in the town. Fleur weaves baskets and makes blankets out of rabbit fur, while Eli and his brother, Nector, hunt and sell beaver and otter pelts to White trappers. Yet, their work is constantly devalued. As Runtić and Knežević point out, “They exchange valuable works of art they have created during hours of patient work below price for a couple of worthless groceries at the local shop,” and the White trappers only pay the Kashpaw brothers a fraction of what their furs are worth (78, translation my own). In the last desperate effort to raise money, Margaret and Nanapush “stripped every bush around Matchimanito” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 176) of cranberry bark they sold to the tonic dealer. Years later, Nanapush remains ashamed of their actions, realizing that the Chippewa themselves have been pushed into exploiting the land for the sake of the White people. In his own words, “The thin pungent odor stuck to us, lodged in our clothes, and would be with us forever as the odor of both salvation and betrayal, for I was never able to walk in the woods again, to break a stick of cranberry without remembering the outcome of the toil that split the skin on our fingers” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 176).

Still, all their efforts fail. The overexploitation of the soil and the excessive lumbering of the forest makes it impossible for the Chippewa to live off the land. Each winter brings starvation as the land lies dormant, and there is less and less game to hunt every year. The winter Eli stays with Nanapush in his cabin, they are forced to eat groper meat of “spoiled taste” (*Tracks* 99) and later almost starve to death. Though Eli is an excellent tracker, he is forced to travel extremely far into the forest to hunt down a moose, requiring Nanapush’s magical aid and nearly freezing to death in the process. Even Fleur, granted spiritual powers by her Pillager heritage, cannot feed her family. When she sends Eli looking for deer according to the path she saw in her dream, he comes back empty handed, saying that “the snow where she sent him was smooth and bare” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 171). Even the lake which hosts her protector, the water man Misshepeshu, has run out of fish. In their last winter together, the family at Matchimanito has nothing to eat but a soup made of “shredded meat, marrow, and some cattail roots,” which makes their hungry stomachs rumble even though it is “mainly water” (145). Though *Tracks* postulates that Fleur’s powers have weakened due to the grief over the loss of her second child, it can also be assumed she went into labor too early because she was starving throughout most of her pregnancy. Ultimately, the Chippewa are forced to rely on government aid in order to stay alive. As Nanapush reveals, “in the end it was not Fleur’s dreams, my skill, Eli’s desperate searches, or Margaret’s preserves that saved us. It was the government commodities sent from Hoopdance in six wagons” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 171).

Economically devastated to the point where they can barely afford food, the Anishinaabe also face the threat of losing their land due to unpaid taxes. Nanapush reveals how “Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one-hundred-pound weight of flour” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 8). Father Damien’s arrival at Matchimanito brings both salvation from hunger and the annual fee list. Nanapush notes how “most families, at the end of this long winter, were behind in what they owed, how some had lost their allotments . . . we found the names we sought – Pillager, Kashpaw, Nanapush. All were there, figures and numbers, and all impossible. We stared without feeling at the amounts due before summer” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 172-73). The irony of his people being exiled from their original territory in a “storm of government papers” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1), only to lose their land once again to foreclosure, is not lost on Nanapush. On multiple occasions, he names the government involvement in the life of the Chippewa as the root of all their suffering, bitterly pointing out: “Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill.



We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 4). In the end, all of their efforts raise just enough money to pay an allotment on one piece of land, and Margaret and Nector use it to secure the Kashpaw property. Thus, Pillager land is bought by the lumbering company, and Fleur is forced out. In her last spiteful stand, Fleur uses her powers to fell the trees at Matchimanito, laughing at the lumberjacks’ fear, and leaves Matchimanito carrying only the sentimental remains of her life so far: “weed-wrapped stones from the lake bottom, bundles of roots, a coil of rags, and the umbrella that had shaded her baby. The grave markers I had scratched. . . . An extra set of moccasins and a thin charred pair of patent leather shoes. . . the white fan from Eli” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 224).

The economic hardships also cause the dissolution of the tribe, creating a community divided from within based on the degree of their assimilation into the White society. Many Chippewa, like the Morrisseys, Pukwans, and Lazarres, choose to accept the new capitalistic values and cooperate with the colonizers for their own personal gain. The best example from this group is Bernadette Morrissey. She belongs to one of the most assimilated families on the reservation, being of mixed Anishinaabe and European origin. She has clearly chosen to side with the mainstream White society, becoming a devout Christian and going so far as to work in the government office, helping handle fees and foreclosures on the Native land. As a result, she obtains personal gain at the expense of the less assimilated part of the tribe. Not only can she afford to pay the allotments on both hers and her brother Napoleon’s land but she also buys two more plots from those who cannot afford to pay the Government fees. Thus, “Bernadette betrays the tribal tradition of unity, profiting off of other people’s misfortune or lack of knowledge of the new laws. Her greed for land also confirms that she has completely rejected tribal values and accepted the Western understanding of land as a marketable good” (Runtić and Knežević 79, translation my own). When Nanapush finds out that the Pillager land has been sold, he accuses the agent: “How much of that good price, that illegal late fee perhaps, splashed into your pockets? How much is stored in the walls of my old cabin, which you gave Lazarres? How much cash did you stuff into the mattress of Bernadette?” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 208). Bernadette does not even try to deny this – instead, “she stared at me without shame, and said, ‘Get out you old longhair’” (208). Her usage of “longhair” as an insult, next to Napoleon referring to the Matchimanito family as “blanket Indians,” shows that the Morrisseys have internalized the Western society’s distaste for the “uncivilized” Natives. All in all, “Bernadette acts for the benefit of the Whites by weakening the resistance to

assimilation and selling Native land” (Runtić and Knežević 79, translation my own), actively aiding in the destruction of her own culture, as many “government Indians” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 185) did in real life.

The “government Indians” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 185) are opposed to characters like Nanapush, Margaret, and the Pillager cousins, Fleur and Moses, who still nurture the traditional Chippewa values and ways of life. They prioritize their family over themselves, which is best depicted in how they split the meager dinner of “mainly water” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 145) soup:

[Margaret] dished the next plate to Eli, then one to Fleur, who halved hers with Lulu. . . . Nanapush handed his nearly full plate back to Margaret, who took a spoonful and passed the dish to Fleur, whose bowl was already cleaned by Lulu. “I ate while I cooked,” said Margaret. She looked at Fleur, so gaunt, the baby pushing out, and at Lulu, eating with such ravenous attention, sucking the thin bones and licking her fingers. “We old ones don’t need much, because our stomachs are too bitter.” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 145)

Even though they are all starving, they willingly give up their portion of the food for the sake of the most vulnerable members of the family. Their behavior is starkly opposed by Pauline, who eats her serving and finishes off the pregnant Fleur’s plate without much thought. Her greediness and lack of care for anyone but herself show that she has adopted the individualistic, capitalistic Western values. The Kaspahaws, Nanapush, and Fleur provide for themselves using the established cultural practices like hunting and foraging, as well as by engaging in traditional art forms like weaving baskets and blankets. Keeping with the traditional values, Nanapush goes to great lengths to perform proper burial rites for the dead Pillagers. Afterwards, he and Fleur rise out of their near-deadly grief because Father Damien’s arrival demands that “a guest must eat” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 7), meaning that they are urged to live by their duty to observe Chippewa rules of hospitality. Moreover, Nanapush and the Pillager cousins are members of Midewiwin, also known as the Grand Medicine Society. If the Chippewa had not become divided, they would have taken up roles of spiritual guides and healers of the tribe, as their spiritual connections to the land grant them special abilities (Barry). Finally, the family at Matchimanito is fiercely protective of their land, seeing it as a place of spiritual connection instead of a mere physical possession. They choose to isolate themselves on the Pillager land near Lake Matchimanito, which is traditionally believed to house ancestral spirits. Therefore, Matchimanito functions as “a place in-between the world

of the living and the dead, the material and the spiritual, the past and the present, but it also represents a boundary between two symbolic concepts of human relationship with the land – the Native one and that of the colonizer” (Runtić and Knežević 80, translation my own). This holy land being set upon by the lumber companies that are willing to walk “upon the fresh graves of Pillagers” and cross “death roads to plot out the deepest water” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 7) in search of profit represents the endangerment of the Anishinaabe’s culture under the new capitalist world order. In the end, the new world order seemingly wins, as the land is sold, its trees felled, and the family is scattered, never to unite again.

### **2.1.1. Broken Families and Mother-Hunger**

The loss of culture and community due to White hegemony and economic hardships has had a devastating impact on Native American families. As Hughes points out, “In a community ravaged by illness, poverty, and white-instituted dependence, familial disconnection is a growing reality” (89). Thus, “Erdrich’s novels are filled with orphans, thrown away children, adoptive mothers, and quests for or denials of one’s mother” (Wong 120), echoing “the realistic plight of the Native American women, unable to sustain bonds or protect and nurture their children, after conquest and defeat of the culture” (Hansen 121). *Tracks* equates parenthood to cultural transmission, depicting the family unit as a place where new members are brought into the community by adopting shared values and expected social behaviors. Thus, the destruction of familial bonds presents the biggest danger to community’s survival, because

In a disintegrating family unit both the present and the future are destroyed. Especially destructive is the loss of a child, for the future of tribal survival depends upon the willingness of the child not only to acknowledge her roots but to embrace the responsibility that those roots bring with them. When a child leaves her culture, when he dies or seeks other cultures within which to live, the entire community feels the loss. (Flavin 3)

As Nanapush points out, “We lose our children in different ways. They turn their faces to the white towns, like Nector as he grew, or they become so full of what they see in the mirror there is no reasoning with them anymore, like you. Worst of all is the true loss, unbearable, and yet it must be borne” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 170). Nanapush’s whole family dies from tuberculosis, and Fleur loses her second born to premature labor, possibly brought on by her

own starvation and overall poor health. On the other hand, the “you” Nanapush addresses in his narrative is his granddaughter, Lulu, who returns from the residential school “blinded and deafened” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 205) to her culture – with “uncovered knees” (178), shoes with heels “like tiny knives” (166), and utter unwillingness to acknowledge her mother, whom she blames for abandoning her. Importantly, Fleur does not send Lulu away willingly. As Nanapush explains to Lulu,

She sent you to the government school, it is true, but you must understand there were reasons: there would be no place for you, no safety on this reservation, no hiding from government papers, or from Morrisseys who shaved heads or the Turcot Company, leveler of a whole forest. There was also no predicting what would happen to Fleur herself. (Erdrich, *Tracks* 219)

Her intentional separation from her only living child is Fleur’s last desperate attempt to “prepare her for life in the Anglo-dominated world: the world that has felled the forests around Fleur’s cabin; the world that has silenced Misshepesu, the water monster; the world that has turned Chippewa against Chippewa as relatives steal land allotments from one another” (Wong 186). Fleur’s inability to raise her daughter is “a direct result of cultural devastation,” as “Fleur is groundless on multiple levels: the government has usurped her family’s land, her relatives have stolen her land, and the developers have destroyed her land” (Doney 10). Following the correlation *Tracks* establishes between motherhood and transmission of cultural identity, “the disrupted maternal relationship results in the child’s displacement, functioning as a metaphor for the community’s severance from tradition and the land” (Doney 1). The mother “appears here as a creative artist and conscious survivalist, wisely ensuring continuance through the cyclical reimagining and reuse of her own substance” (Hughes 95). Yet, “the history of imperial colonization that disrupted Native communities and families firmly associates motherhood with the cultural destructions brought on by genocide, ecocide, sociological and economic destruction of tribal systems, and the suppression of spirituality” (Doney 4). This is how giving up one’s child to a residential school, a place which will surely suppress her cultural identity and will possibly expose her to abuse, becomes an act of love, the mother’s last attempt to protect her child. Thus, the cultural devastation suffered by the Chippewa manifests in “Lulu’s white-identification and in Fleur’s progressive detachment from family due to her family’s increasing detachment from the land” (Doney 10).

## 2.2. Revising History

In *Tracks*, Erdrich engages in what Tiffin calls “counter-discourse” by “challenging the notion of literary universality” (32) and rewriting history “from the viewpoint of the formerly voiceless subaltern” (Lonien 15). As said by Toni Morrison, “While you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it” (qtd. in Davis 224). Throughout *Tracks*, the readers are constantly faced with the price the Native community has paid for the much-celebrated American progress. The territorial expansion and rapid economic growth generated by the capitalistic business model, which turned the U.S. into the world-power it is today also forced the Anishinaabe to live in poverty on barren reservations – to suffer illness and starvation as they helplessly watch their ancestral land being taken and destroyed. That same pressure for “progress,” which demanded the “wild” Natives to be “civilized” in places like government schools forced the Anishinaabe to shun their own cultural values and accept the Western ones in order to survive. The resulting tribal disintegration, discord, and polarization is paralleled in the plot of the novel, which intertwines two narrative strands – the official, White-controlled narrative and the Native version of events. One of the ways this is made evident are the chapter titles, which set the events of the novel in both Western and Chippewa time. Thus “Winter 1912” is also “Manitou-geezisohns – Little Spirit Sun” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1), “Spring 1919” is “Baubaukunaetae-geezis – Patches of Earth Sun” (192), and so on. Furthermore, *Tracks* is a narrative framed in storytelling, told by two alternating narrators with two very different agendas. One of them is Nanapush, a “trickster grandfather” (Clarke 37) who narrates the events of the novel to his adopted granddaughter, Lulu, in hopes of reuniting her with her mother, Fleur, and connecting her to her Native heritage after her stay at the residential school. The motive behind Nanapush’s narrative and the way he imparts it show that he still nurtures traditional community-oriented Chippewa values. His chapters have the distinct quality of oral storytelling, summoning the image of an old man sitting in front of the fire, talking to his granddaughter. Firstly, his “direct address and colloquial tone” make it clear that Nanapush is narrating the story to an audience in front of him (Hughes 90). As Sergi points out, “His words suggest the rhythms of speech: at key moments in the narrative, readers sense a whispered statement, an abrupt phrase, a long pause” (279). On multiple occasions, he includes Lulu into the storytelling process by urging her to pay attention at the important parts: “This is where you come in, my girl, so listen” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 57) and scolding her when she does not – “Your mother always showed the proper respect to me.

Even when I bored her, she made good effort at pretending some interest” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 178). He is also open about what he hopes to achieve with his narration: “If you wanted to make an old man’s last days happy, Lulu, you would convince your mother and your father to visit me. I’d bring old times back, force them to reckon, make them look into one another’s eyes again” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 210). Keeping with the dynamic of oral storytelling, Nanapush as the “narrator does not name himself, as he would not in a traditional face-to-face storytelling situation, nor is the addressee named except to designate her relationship to the narrator” (Peterson 985). Furthermore, “Nanapush’s colloquial tone is balanced by the formal rhetoric of a Native American storyteller. In the first paragraph of Chapter One, for example, he follows the traditional model of beginning by orienting himself to the four directions” (Hughes 90). Sergi postulates that Nanapush represents the fictional prototype of the “story-backed old man giv[ing] the child eyes and voices, narratives that touch and are carried for life: words incarnate, flesh-and-blood ties, an embodied imagination” (Lincoln qtd. in Sergi 279) commonly appearing in Native American oral tradition. In addition, Nanapush’s narrative position is mostly relational – he appears primarily as Fleur’s adoptive father and Lulu’s grandfather, placing himself as a supporting character instead of focusing on his own life and accomplishments, which demonstrates that he places his community and traditional Chippewa values above his own ego. Thus, “Nanapush is recreating the history of the family unit, hoping that his story will reunite the family for the sake of the future. The oral context of the novel heightens the tension within the text for it signals the potential for cultural survival or destruction” (Flavin 3). Furthermore, his chapters present oral storytelling as a crucial tool of cultural transmission for the Chippewa. Erdrich uses the character of Nanapush to highlight the power of language. At one point, he literally evades deaths by speaking, explaining: “I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 46). He also uses songs to keep Fleur alive on the trip from her family’s home to his cabin and to heal Lulu’s frostbitten feet. Emphasizing the connection between language and culture, Kristeva maintains:

Language is more than a form of communication: it reveals the concepts that shape the significance and legacy beyond the word itself. Language defines a culture’s style and method of looking at life and the individual’s place within that culture. It is also “the margin,” the demarcator of beauty, and the repository of a culture’s defining boundaries: right, wrong, good, bad, and its liminal thresholds. (paraphrased in Atkinson 12)

Nanapush confirms this intrinsic bond between language and the communal identity by stating: “We do not have as much to do with our young as we think. They do not come from us. They just appear, as if they broke through a net of vines. Once they live in our lives and speak our language, they slowly become like us” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 169). What he postulates is that, rather than blood, it is common values and language that initiate one into a community – “for Nanapush, the oral tradition links human to human, past to present, physical to spiritual” (Flavin 10). In this way, storytelling becomes a crucial tool in ensuring communal and cultural survival. As Nanapush spins his tale, he invites the readers to be part of the storytelling performance together with Lulu, passing its message on to them as well as her. Thus, Nanapush’s storytelling ensures cultural continuity for his tribe while standing in the face of oblivion.

The other narrator is Pauline Puyat, later renamed sister Leopolda. Throughout the novel, she transforms from a self-conscious *Métis*<sup>3</sup> girl envious of Fleur’s beauty and skill at poker to a psychologically unstable religious fanatic desperately seeking to blend into White society. Renouncing her Native heritage to the point of delusion, she sees the Chippewa culture as a relic set on a path of extinction and is even relishing in it:

The land will be sold and divided. Fleur’s cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers’ low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened. (Erdrich, *Tracks* 204-205)

Moreover, she chooses to help the process by accepting employment at a residential school, vowing to “use my influence to guide [the pupils], to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 205). Chapters narrated by Pauline have a distinct written quality as opposed to the tone of oral storytelling of Nanapush’s chapters. While his narration mirrors his orientation towards his family and community, Pauline’s narrative showcases her egocentrism. As Hughes points out, “we get the feeling that we are being told a morality tale, in which she is the hero and exemplar. Of what, exactly, she is the example, we must judge for ourselves. In this way, Pauline’s chapters read something like a spiritual autobiography, in

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<sup>3</sup> *Métis* is the French term commonly used for the members of the Anishinaabe who have mixed Native and European lineage. In Canada, *Métis* is also one of “three major, legally recognized aboriginal groups, the other two being the First Nations and the Inuit” (“*Métis*”).

the tradition of Saint Augustine” (98). Over the course of the novel, the written and the spoken word are conceptualized as the representations of the Western capitalist worldview opposed by the traditional Chippewa one. In many instances, Nanapush points at government papers as the root of all evil for the Natives, citing the Chippewas’ inability to read or understand Western legislation as the reason so many lost their land: “There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away with thumbs and crosses” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 100). Therefore, Pauline’s preference for written language shows her rejection of her Chippewa culture, making her point of view the antithesis to that of Nanapush.

Thus, Erdrich presents the readers with two different interpretations of the same story. Both narrators are unreliable in their own way. Pauline is negatively biased towards Native Americans and driven virtually mad by the struggle between her Chippewa identity and the Western identity she so desires. She hallucinates about Jesus coming to visit her one night in the nunnery: “He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 137). In addition, Pauline often preforms acts of self-harm in order to “cleanse” herself and goes through multiple psychotic meltdowns. During one of these episodes, she mistakes her former lover, Napoleon, for Satan and strangles him with a rosary. All of these signs of her mental disorder put into question the validity of her narrative voice.

According to Brogan, Nanapush’s name as well as his demeanor connect him to Nanabushu, a character from Anishinaabe oral tradition:

His name refers us to the legendary Chippewa trickster-hero, Nanabushu. Nanabushu is an intermediary – supernatural, but born of a mortal mother, he is sent to the Chippewa as a healer. He also possesses powers of transformation, a physical form of translation. He is the most beloved of all Chippewa spirits, the trickster who is often tricked, whose foolishness endears, whose fallibility brings him closer to the human. (Brogan 180)

In the same vein, Hughes argues that Nanapush’s trickster nature also shows through his bilingualism and “amoral trickery, creativity, woodland know-how, healing and liberation, androgyny, bawdy humor, and strong sexual appetite” (Hughes 91). Nanapush has every reason to glorify Fleur’s actions and build her up into the near-mythical figure of the last descendant of the powerful Pillager line, as this version of the story is likely to entice Lulu.



Importantly, while their opinions widely differ, Nanapush's and Pauline's versions of events do not always contradict each other. On the contrary, often the piece of the narrative missing from one's chapter will be found in the chapter of the other. For example, while Nanapush is the one who narrates about Fleur's return from Argus, it is Pauline who retells the events which took place there, as she was the only witness. Thus, "the reader, just as if she were at an actual oral storytelling performance, must listen to both Pauline's and Nanapush's stories and create her own interpretation or theory of Fleur by carefully weighing what she knows about the two narrators against their interpretations of the story" (Clarke 41). Furthermore, *Tracks* "holds Nanapush's and Pauline's antithetical views in tension, showing point of view to be inherent to any historical narrative" (Peterson 981), bringing into question the known historiography of the Anishinaabe – asking who wrote it down, how they did it, and why?

### 2.3. Tradition in *Tracks*

The pivotal point at which Nanapush's and Pauline's interpretation of events differs is their description of Fleur. Fleur is the personification of tradition – a powerful medicine woman granted supernatural powers by her spiritual connection to the land. Throughout the novel, Fleur's description is filled with images of nature – her smile is a “white wolf grin” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 19), and her “hips fishlike, slippery, narrow” (18). She is fiercely protective of her ancestral land, using her abilities to keep it out of Government hands:

The Agent went out there, then got lost, spent a whole night following the moving lights and lamps of people who would not answer him, but talked and laughed among themselves. They only let him go at dawn because he was so stupid. Yet he asked Fleur again for money, and the next thing we heard he was living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts. (Erdrich, *Tracks* 8-9)

Furthermore, Fleur is associated with all the great beings of Chippewa mythology. While she is giving birth, Nanapush describes how “it was as if the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur, loose, arguing. I recognized them. Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear's low rasp” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 59). In particular, she is continuously associated with bears, animals which are highly regarded in Chippewa mythology due to their human-like characteristics and the fact that their hibernation cycle resembles rebirth (Barry 25-26). The Pillager family were the members of the bear clan, and since “power travels in the bloodlines, handed before birth” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 31), Fleur inherited her family's bear nature. Just like a bear seemingly dying in the winter and being reborn in the spring, Fleur has drowned three times, and returned to life just as many. Yet, the fact that she forced someone to take her place in death each time, combined with her “skin of lakeweed” (22), thin, green dress and damp, tail-like braids (18), also associates Fleur with “Misshepesu, the water monster, who was said by traditional Chippewa . . . to cause death by drowning” (Clarke 33). The Chippewa at the reservation believe the lake man who “takes the body of a lion, a fat brown worm, or a familiar man” (11) desires Fleur, and when Lulu is born, her “green eyes and skin the color of an old penny have made more talk, as no one can decide if the child is mixed blood or what, fathered in a smokehouse, or by a man with brass scales, or by the lake” (31). By combining “traditional Chippewa oral narratives of Wolf and Water-Monster and then re-embodying them in a new pattern, Erdrich creates a character who is slippery, changeable and

mysterious” (Clarke 33) and who remains an enigma until the very end. Over the duration of the novel, Fleur never speaks for herself. The narrative consists of two different interpretations of her life up until she leaves Matchimanito. And while Nanapush “describes Fleur’s ‘animalistic’ nature as positive, passionate energy, Pauline gives Fleur superhuman abilities and depicts her as an evil, dangerous anomaly serving Satan and Misshepesu” (Runtić and Knežević 89, translation my own). Because she is jealous of Fleur and despises the Chippewa tradition she represents, Pauline spreads rumors about her, amplifying the tribe’s fear of her power and allure by claiming: “She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn’t talk about. Some say she kept the finger of a child in her pocket and a powder of unborn rabbits in a leather thong around her neck” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 12). Pauline recognizes that “between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake, the spirit which they said was neither good nor bad but simply had an appetite, Fleur was the hinge” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 139) and seeks to close this symbolic door under the guise of bringing the Chippewa souls to Christ. Nanapush, on the other hand, tries his best to keep the door open. Thus, the two narrators’ “contradictory interpretations of Fleur, like the oral tradition itself, become the object of continual interpretation and retelling – changeable, disreputable, contradictory and variable” (Clarke 41).

It is important to examine how tradition is conceptualized in a novel so concerned with its preservation. The search for heritage in *Tracks* focuses on how the Native community survives by incorporating the traditional way of life into present circumstances – something the author sees as “one of the strengths of Indian culture. . . . You pick and choose and keep and discard. . . . You look back and say, ‘Who am I from?’ You must question. You must make certain choices. You’re able to” (Bruchac 83). Realistically, there may be little else to do:

The Chippewa, in contact with missionaries and fur traders long before the United States appropriated their land, incorporated white elements into their culture more quickly than most North American tribes; one would have to go back many generations to find what could be called a purely indigenous culture. (Brogan 171)

Erdrich “defines tradition not as a changeless essence, but as imaginative construction, built from but not limited to the familiar materials of a people’s cultural treasury” (Brogan 173). Heritage in *Tracks* becomes fluid and full of motion. It is something to be preserved, but it also serves a more practical purpose – helping Native American characters orient themselves in the changing world and gather strength to live on and change with it. Thus, “the recovery

of the past is not an end in itself, but a vehicle through which group identity is, in response to present conditions, newly reconfigured – not merely reasserted or repeated” (Brogan 174). In the novel, this process of reconfiguration takes place through the storytelling ritual performed by Nanapush. As Lades points out, the Chippewa stories have always “shifted with the personalities speaking, perhaps with the occasions, and with the localities” (199). The audience would listen for the narrator’s interpretation as much as for the story, meaning “a new telling or version of a story can at once be a criticism and commentary on the tale as previously told” (Clarke 36). As Pauline points out, “It comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning” (31). Indeed, Erdrich herself is acting as an interpreter by creating a “transformational text which cavorts in the margins and flirts with danger because it plays with different parts of traditional myths, pulls stories this way and that and threatens to alter the shape of the oral tradition by bringing it into a new, written, pattern” (Clarke 35). In this way, she stresses how it is possible, even necessary, to adapt old stories to the present situation without being disrespectful or shedding their original meaning. In fact, while she stresses the power and importance of oral tradition, Erdrich also admits the necessity of the written medium taking on the role of a storyteller:

While Nanapush’s narrative has not brought mother and daughter together as he had hoped, it has brought Lulu back to a world she once seemed intent on abandoning, evidence of the power and perhaps of the limitations of oral communication in a world that comes to depend upon a system of post to bring people together. (Flavin 12)

Nanapush has witnessed the dissolution of the traditional way of life, but he has also ensured its continuity by adapting its key elements to fit his present role. At the end of *Tracks*, he admits that he has decided he must fight the colonizers on their terms, “For I did stand for tribal chairman, as you know, defeating Pukwan in that last year. To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 225). His decision to adopt a part of the Western culture as a method of resistance ultimately brings him victory. He is voted chairman over Pukwan, the “government Indian,” who abuses his power at the expense of the tribe, suggesting that he will fight to make the sure life at the reservation will get better for the Chippewa. More importantly, he brings Lulu home from the government school, reconnecting the future of the tribe to her personal and cultural heritage. Thus, “The end of *Tracks* does not find Nanapush dejected or

hopeless; instead, the reader is introduced to a Nanapush who acknowledges that times are changing, and that he must do all he can to maintain Native traditions, culture, and lands, despite the continual advance of colonial powers” (Wilson 31).

Erdrich employs the image of a ghost in order to explore the necessity and the mechanisms of cultural translation. As Brogan points out,

Cultural ghost stories, which feature the haunting of a people by the ghosts of its own past, represent one way a group actively revises its relationship to the past. Not surprisingly, these stories tend to emerge in the aftermath of times of swift and often traumatic change, when old social bonds have been unhinged and new group identities must be formulated. (174)

*Tracks* is set in exactly such a moment, thus becoming filled with ghosts bearing a “dual sense of ghostliness as representing power and abjection” (Brogan 186). While their presence can be understood as a metaphor for dealing with loss, the novel also lets us know that the ghosts are real and very much sentient: “But the Pillagers were as stubborn as the Nanapush clan and would not leave my thoughts. I think they followed me home” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 6). Brogan summarizes that Erdrich’s ghosts function on three different levels in the narrative. Firstly, they represent the place of Native Americans in mainstream American history: “America is an idea to which natives are inimical. The Indian represented permanence and continuity to Americans who were determined to call this country new. Indians must be ghost” (Rodriguez 4). The second function is, perhaps, their more obvious role as reminders of the painful past: “Erdrich has explicitly linked her vocation as writer to her identity as survivor of a nearly annihilated culture. Spirits of the dead in her fiction thus bear witness to the destruction of traditional native cultures and the subsequent cultural invisibility of Native Americans” (Brogan 169). Lastly,

Ghosts . . . can also represent continuity with the past. Ancestral ghosts have, in the context of traditional Chippewa religion, powerful and positive connotations. For the Chippewa, as for many Native American cultures, the living and the dead participate in one integrated reality. The return of ancestor spirits ensures a continuity between present and past. The retrieval of lost traditions in much contemporary Native American literature is signaled by the appearance of spirits. (Brogan 170)

Thus, Erdrich’s ghosts hold a dual, bitter-sweet nature. They are both the sickness and the cure, a reminder of the traumatic past as well as a vessel through which Native traditions are

kept alive: “The vaporous body of the ghost provides Erdrich with an apt metaphor for the malleable, partly remembered and partly imagined nature of tradition. . . . The turn to the ghost as reconstructive agent simultaneously testifies to and attempts to transcend terrible loss” (Brogan 170).

Moreover, Erdrich links the motif of possession to the process of mourning and the necessity of reconfiguring cultural patterns in order to accommodate the communal trauma. When Nanapush brings the near-dead Fleur home, the Pillager ghosts follow them. In their grieving, the living inhabit a transitional space at the margins of life and death, and Nanapush and Fleur must tread carefully not to summon their deceased loved ones: “We feared that they would hear us and never rest, come back out of pity for the loneliness we felt. They would sit in the snow outside the door, waiting until from longing we joined them” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 5). As the names of the dead choke them, Nanapush reveals: “We had gone half windigo” (6). *Windigo* is a creature from Ojibwe mythology, a “cannibalistic monster set loose by human greed, envy, and jealousy” (Tharp 117); “a giant, a skeleton of ice, the embodiment of winter starvation, a cannibal who can devour whole villages” (Jaskoski 54). *Windigo* sickness sets in when “this dangerous spirit takes possession of a human soul, causing an irresistible desire to consume human flesh” (Jaskoski 54). *Windigo* is featured in stories focused on the “starving time of winter when food is in short supply and anyone taking more than their share effectively eats into the bodies of those around them” (Tharp 117). These stories serve as cautionary tales, pointing at the importance of “balance and self-restraint in human relations, as in human interaction with the natural world” (Tharp 117). As Brogan points out,

The parallel Erdrich establishes between mourning and windigo possession underlines the degree to which Nanapush and Fleur’s private grief for family members can also be seen as a response to a larger cultural devastation. . . . Mourning as ghostly possession, a process of incorporating the dead, has not only psychological but broader social implications in *Tracks*. The dynamics of personal grieving become emblematic of a culture’s response to rapid, traumatic change. (178)

The only other time the *windigo* imagery comes into focus in *Tracks* is with Pauline: “Because she is so tall and skinny that men look past her without even seeing her, because she is so greedy that she can eat Fleur’s food even when Fleur is pregnant and malnourished, and because she seems ‘afflicted, touched in the mind’, Erdrich implies Pauline is ‘windigo’”

(Clarke 38). On one hand, this shows how her internalization of mainstream White values and racism has made Pauline psychologically unstable and emotionally cold, devoid of any empathy for her own people. On the other, Nanapush's and Pauline's possessed states serve to display different ways in which one may either accept or refuse to deal with one's cultural trauma. "In *Tracks*, what an eater cannot digest eventually consumes him. Nanapush feeds on the ghosts of the dead, but learns to digest or integrate them with the present" (Brogan 184), ensuring that he can coexist with them without being overtaken or repressing the memory of them. He aids the dead in becoming a part of the communal history and passes down their stories to Lulu in a way which spares her having to "digest" them: "Mediated by Nanapush's language, the dead present no danger to Lulu. Through his narrative, he invites her to internalize the ghostly past in 'a proper order,' in the form of organized memory" (Brogan 182). In contrast, "Pauline cannot digest the past, refuses to allow it to be integrated into her body, and is thus herself consumed" (Brogan 184). Throughout the novel, Erdrich establishes that the ghost's presence only becomes a haunting when not mediated by the proper burial rituals. Similarly, the past, no matter how painful, becomes an issue only if it is left to fester. By nourishing their cultural wounds through open and respectful engagement with the past, Erdrich's characters are able to navigate it without the risk of becoming possessed by it. The point, then, is not to banish the ghost, but to establish a coexistence that does not anchor one's tongue (Erdrich, *Tracks* 5) – for the past cannot be erased but it can certainly be lived with.

## 2.4. Native Identity in Relation to the Land

*Tracks* places great emphasis on the importance of relational identity for an individual's personal development and the overall cultural continuation of the Chippewa. The characters who are immersed into the community, like Nanapush or Margaret, manage to gain their footing in the new, White-dominated world order while still staying true to their origins. On the other hand, those like Pauline, who have completely cut themselves off from the tribe, develop a very unstable sense of personal identity, leaving their psyche fragile and exposed to outside influences. The communal and individual identity in *Tracks* are inseparable. However, the Chippewa definition of community is not limited only to people – it expands to include all parts of the living world as well as the world of the dead, where the Native ancestors reside. In Erdrich's work, space “exists not merely in a physical sense but in a metaphysical sense as well” (Flavin 5). It is “an image which links the past with the present, generation with generation” (Flavin 5). The Native land is conceptualized as the core of Native American cultural identity. As told by Erdrich,

In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history. Unlike most contemporary writers, a traditional storyteller fixes listeners in an unchanging landscape combined of myth and reality. People and place are inseparable. (“Where I Ought to Be”)

Thus, the characters' struggle to preserve their land becomes emblematic of their efforts to preserve their cultural identity: “The land is invested with meaning, providing a spatial symbolic order that reflects cultural values. Identity – both personal and tribal – emerges in relation to a particular territory” (Brogan 171). Erdrich explores how the loss of Native land causes fragmentation and estrangement through her characterization of Pauline's confused sense of self and Lulu and Nector's partial White-identification. Moreover, the separation of the once communally owned land into smaller, government-issued allotments causes the fragmentation of the community, turning Chippewa against Chippewa as they try to survive in the new world order. Those who decide to thrive in it, like the Morrisseys and the Lazarres, completely sever their spiritual connection to the land. Their perception of the land as a purely material possession meant to be bought and sold in the name of personal gain shows that they have completely detached themselves from their Native culture and community, replacing them with a set of Western, capitalist values. Thus, the loss of Native land in



*Tracks* is equated to the loss and dissipation of the cultural identity and the Chippewa community.

However, Erdrich also depicts the land's potential for change and endurance. As previously discussed, she considers the process of cultural translation necessary for cultural survival. For Erdrich, adapting old traditions to new circumstances does not signify their extinction – rather, it ensures their continued existence. Thus, the land she describes is not an unchangeable “terra firma” (Brogan 173). Rather, it offers a framework for cultural revision by ensuring continuity with the past:

Erdrich suggests that one's home – “where I ought to be” – and the cultural identity that place fosters are chosen rather than simply inherited – and may even be . . . partly invented. Incorporation is the word Erdrich frequently uses to describe the process of cultural revision and invention... Incorporation takes the new into the old, changing both, creating an entity different from either that is nevertheless experienced as continuous with the past. (Brogan 173)

Thus, the Native land in *Tracks* becomes a place of both the extinction and the rebirth of the Anishinaabe culture; yet, it always remains its source: “The blood draws us back, as if it runs through a vein of earth” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 31), and the earth is ever-changing and ever-giving.

The interconnectedness of the Chippewa community with their land is most prominently depicted through the image of trees. Throughout the novel, “the tree becomes a symbol of Indigenous people's life and their spiritual values” (Runtić and Knežević 81, translation my own). Often, the comparison is made directly – Fleur is described as “great and dark as a fixed tree” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 158), and Nanapush tells Lulu: “I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and another was lost” (9). Fleur, Nanapush, and the Kashpaws, who still nurture a traditional way of life, chose to live on the forested land near Matchimanito, immersing themselves into their cultural heritage rather than move to a more populated part of the reservation where Western ideology has taken root. It is significant that the capitalist threat to Indigenous survival comes in the form of companies looking lumber – literally felling the trees and the Natives at once – as the destruction of the naturally forested habitat forces them to either starve or cooperate with the colonizers. This was intentionally done, as

apart from fulfilling the need for new settlements, the logging of trees on the reservation also served to remove the last obstacles to the Anishinaabe's adjustment

to an agricultural economy. The officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs thought that the existence of forests full of game would only pose an obstacle to the progress and the propagation of American culture. (Danziger paraphrased in Runtić and Knežević 81, translation my own)

Thus, “the trees share the fate of the Native population as collateral standing in the way of Western civilization” (Runtić and Knežević 81, translation my own). The tribe takes on a new symbol – paper, a byproduct of felled trees. As Nanapush bitterly notices after the loss of Matchimanito and Lulu, “I began to see what we were becoming, and the years have borne me out: a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 225). The image of the once-living, vivacious organism being pressed and dried points at the fact that “the people, like the trees, have lost their identity, having been reduced to a thin industrial product” (Runtić and Knežević 82, translation my own). Further irony is found in the fact that this byproduct is the medium through which the bureaucratic machine initiates further exploitation of the land and the Chippewa, mirroring characters like Bernadette Morrissey or the Lazarres, who adapt the dominant ideology, and actively participate in the destruction of their own culture: “Seduced by paper, especially in the form of money, they sacrifice trees, land, and their tribal roots. Green like the cut trees, ‘Dollar bills cause the memory to vanish,’ comments Nanapush on the venality of these characters” (Runtić and Knežević 82, translation my own), concluding that even their fear of Fleur can be “cushioned by the application of government cash” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 174). Still, the overexploited land provides ample resistance. In the last stand against the forces who have come to take her home, Fleur uses her Pillager powers to summon natural forces which take down the remaining trees at Matchimanito before the lumbering company can even touch them. In this act,

With her ability to mobilize the world invisible to the colonizer, Fleur disputes his control over the usurped property . . . the newcomers will soon realize that their destructive actions have provoked the powerful energy of the spirits, ancestors, nature, and the supernatural. Indigenous beliefs and forces . . . continue to dominate the conquered land thus foreshadow the permanent threat to the spiritual peace of the colonizer. (Runtić and Knežević 83, translation my own)

Lastly, the final tree image shown in the novel is not a site of desperation but that of hope. As Lulu exits the government vehicle, which has returned her to the reservation, Nanapush

describes her happy reunion with her grandparents: “Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and sprang forward, Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 226). Indicating that there are still trees standing and that, just like them, the Chippewa remain firmly rooted, ready to face whatever comes next.

## 2.5. Substitute Parents Ensuring Cultural Survival

*Tracks* combats the image of broken families and lost children by offering substitute modes of parenting. The family at Matchimanito is not blood-related; yet, their status is equal to that of a biological family, since “a tribal household might encompass assorted blood-kin, medicine society ‘kin,’ adoptees, servants, and visitors who have a clan or supernatural claim on membership although they are biologically unrelated to the rest of the household” (Allen 248). In Chippewa tradition, “mothers, as the primary storytellers, sustain individual and cultural life” (Doney 6). Thus, the adoptive mothers “assume a maternal role by immersing their adopted daughters in their personal, cultural, and spiritual histories” (Doney 6) – making Nanapush a substitute mother to Lulu. He ensures her safety and cultural immersion in the tribe through the use of both oral and written language. Through his storytelling, he reacquaints her with her personal heritage and cultural identity, hoping to reunite her with her mother. Yet, the written word allows him to get Lulu back to her place of origin, as he is named as her father on her birth certificate and becomes a bureaucrat specifically to retrieve her from the residential school. As Peterson explains,

Nanapush’s negotiation between the old ways and the exigencies of the present is the significant legacy he leaves to Lulu. He recognizes that it is no longer possible to rely solely on the oral tradition to pass down narratives of the past. To do so would be to end up like Fleur, the funnel of oral history silenced by white encroachment and by writing itself. (990)

Moreover, “although he is excluded from the original birth house by virtue of his sex, Nanapush eventually subverts biology and becomes a mother to Lulu by rebirthing or resurrecting her” (Hughes 96) when she nearly freezes to death running to his cabin as Fleur gives birth the second time. “The connection between them, the tongue-tie, is like an umbilical c(h)ord of his own harmonious spinning, then, or like an amniotic fluid whose ebb and flow sustains the child in liquid lullaby” (Hughes 97) and saves her from losing her legs. Importantly, Lulu’s legs become frostbitten because she puts on the red shoes she is usually forbidden from wearing since they are not suitable for trudging through the woods. The shoes, which Eli bought from a White trader, become the “emblem of white-identification and a rebellious desire to be special” (Hughes 96). It is, however, her Chippewa heritage, in the form of Nanapush’s refusal to let the doctor amputate her feet and his healing songs, which saves her. Furthermore, Nanapush’s narration lets on that Lulu is about to get married

to a member of the Morrissey family, someone he clearly does not approve of. This frames his narration as the scene of a mother counseling her daughter before she enters married life, the ultimate rite of passage into adulthood. Once more, Nanapush takes Fleur's place; yet, he "does not seek to undermine Fleur's parental authority with his Christianized paternity, but to accompany and amplify it" (Hughes 96), hoping Lulu will reunite her family. The novel's ending does not let on whether or not he was successful in this mission, but it does paint Nanapush as victorious in his fulfillment of his motherly role towards Lulu. The closing scene depicts the young Lulu running into his arms as she returns to the reservation, implying her return to her cultural roots and hope for the future of the tribe as it changes with the times, reassessing and rebirthing its cultural identity. "The story comes up different every time, and has no ending" (Erdrich, dedication to Michael Dorris) – just as long as there is someone to tell it and someone willing to listen.

## Conclusion

To summarize, although *Beloved* and *Tracks* belong to two different literary traditions, the similar historical experience of African American and Native American communities, marked by subalternization, subjugation, and subsequent victimization by the dominant society, makes room for a comparative analysis of the two texts. Both novels strive to correct the mainstream historical narrative, which has failed to do justice to the cultural groups they depict. In the case of *Beloved*, this subsumes the re-writing and (re)creating of the neglected African American history in order to salvage it from oblivion. *Tracks*, on the other hand, takes on the task of retelling the history of the United States from the Anishinaabe point of view, showing a drastically different, more brutal side to the dominant narrative of “progress.”

Furthermore, both novels illustrate tremendous multi-generational trauma and its destabilizing effect on one’s cultural identity and communal bonds by depicting one particular family – the Suggs family at 124 and the family at Matchimanito – as representative of the two respective communities’ collective historical experience. Both novels correlate broken family bonds to wider cultural devastation. Focusing on the strained relationships between mothers and daughters, both of them define the maternal bond as the primary route of cultural transmission, with the mother-figure presented as both the giver of life and the giver of identity. As an attempt to “rememory” the unknown ancestors, *Beloved* links the forced separation of mothers and children during slavery, and Sethe’s estrangement from her children after she murders the baby girl, to the lack of personal and communal African American history. In a similar vein, Erdrich’s depiction of Fleur and Lulu’s estrangement exposes the economic devastation of the Chippewa at the end of the nineteenth century, which disrupted the tribe’s cultural continuity and forced parents to send their children to residential schools and thus expose them to White ideology, sacrificing their familial and communal bonds.

In both novels, the cultural identity of the two respective groups is permanently altered by the dominant society, albeit in different ways. Both Morrison and Erdrich present the readers with their communities trying to cope with the traumatic past, each of them haunted by its own ghosts. *Beloved*’s ghost, Sethe’s resurrected daughter, Beloved, who comes back carrying the memories of the sixty million lost to the Middle Passage and more, is the embodiment of the community’s unaddressed trauma. Her presence is necessary for the

healing process to begin, but the ghost also turns malicious once it has dwelt with them for too long, prompting the African American community to come together at last in order to exorcise Beloved from 124. In contrast, the ghosts in *Tracks* are of dual nature. On one hand, they represent the huge loss of life and the trauma suffered by the tribe, and their presence can cause *windigo* possession if not properly mediated. On the other hand, the ghosts inhabiting the Pillager land also embody ancestral spirits, which are bound to the land and connected to the living people through shared culture and customs.

In addition, both novels put great emphasis on the power of oral storytelling. *Beloved* suggests that the narrative processing of traumatic experiences is a crucial element in both individual and collective healing, instrumental in building group solidarity and allowing personal stories to be incorporated into a wider communal and cultural framework. *Tracks* starkly differentiates Chippewa oral tradition from the settlers' written language. Whereas the government papers and Pauline's narrative symbolize White hegemony and the destruction of the traditional Chippewa values, Nanapush's oral storytelling nourishes communal values and ensures the future of the tribe by passing its stories to Lulu.

Although both novels initially focus on the image of a broken family, both of them postulate the idea that substitute parents, and community in general, can take over the identity-giving role a biological mother cannot fulfill due to the lack of resources or excessive trauma. The Black community in *Beloved* gathers around Denver in order to help her thrive into adulthood – nourishing her through food and social connections until she is finally ready to face the world. Likewise, in *Tracks*, Nanapush takes up the role of Lulu's mother, reconnecting her with her Chippewa cultural heritage and her blood-family.

Significantly, both novels share a hopeful ending – a new family is formed in the end of *Beloved* after a time of devastation, and the lost child in *Tracks* returns to her place of origin and the grandparents who eagerly await her. Both Morrison and Erdrich choose to, paradoxically, end their novels with new beginnings, seemingly urging their readers to look forward into the future, as many journeys yet await. Even though the Black characters from *Beloved* have been denied any sense of self during enslavement, their healing process eventually empowers them to (re)create their individual identities. The Chippewa characters in *Tracks*, on the other hand, manage to preserve their cultural identity by means of cultural translation. Erdrich depicts the Anishinaabe tradition as a fluid, changing essence and emphasizes its power to survive by means of adaptation. Characters like Nanapush, who

utilize this power to their advantage, emerge victorious, ensuring the tribe's cultural survival in the changing world.



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