"I AM BELOVED and she is mine": Love and Its Sinister Sister in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

Drawing on the critical practice of affect theory, this paper reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved*'s nuanced representations of love and selfishness as instances of a racialized affect. While many critics have generally noted Morrison's dramatization of love, whether it be benevolent or horrific as a proof of freed subjectivity and sustained intersubjectivity, this paper intends to examine love as an affective force in order to understand love and how it operates in places where it has often been seen as more benevolent or emancipatory, where it is and remains, in other words, ostensibly negative and cruel. Arguably, Morrison's textual representation of love including its sinister sister, selfishness, exemplifies broken and traumatized subjectivity of the racial other during the post-escape life. By racializing love as an affect, the paper particularly reads the human body as space, a space in which the human body and subjectivity are turned against itself by the pernicious force of affection and selfishness.

Keywords: affect, love, selfishness, Toni Morrison, Beloved

"'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it…" such are the sermonic words that Baby Suggs preaches to a small group of freed African Americans in a free town of Cincinnati, Ohio.[1] Her sermon, in short, emphasizes the liberated ownership of the body and the celebration of love as opposed to the harrowing ideologies of slavery, which seek to dehumanize and objectify African American slaves. If the discursive practices of slavery are driven by such impulse to colonize and exploit the racial other physically and psychologically, Toni Morrison undermines such practices that render African Americans passive and are objectified by reclaiming the affective agency of African Americans as is evident in the sermon above. However, this benevolent love is not the only kind of love Morrison dramatizes in order to critique the discursive practices of slavery. There is indeed a different kind of love which is most inherent in Morrison's representation of Sethe and Beloved, the ghost. Each expression of love in *Beloved* is inexplicably tied to the kind of free life one earns and lives. In contrast to Baby Suggs's, Sethe's freedom is not earned through monetary compensation but only made possible through means of escape. Hence, her life after such an escape as is narrated in the convoluted passages of *Beloved* does not allow her to entertain the kind of privilege Baby Suggs is said to possess. Neither is her love similar to that of Baby Suggs. Sethe's love is a dark force. Hence, the critique of the slave system in

Morrison's *Beloved* requires a sustained critical investment on the benevolent emotion of love as well as a dark and sinister "Sethesian love" in order to expose the harrowing effects of *what* appears to have engendered that love in the first place.

Critics have paid particular attention to Morrison's portrayal of love in the lived experiences of African American slaves. Focusing primarily on *Beloved*, Barbara Schapiro (2000), for instance, reads the novel's "central problem of recognizing and claiming one's own subjectivity". This recognition and reclaiming of one's status as a human subject, Schapiro argues, is dependent on the human environment, and can only be achieved through the characters' responsive and relational experience of love. She writes, "The experience of one's cohesiveness and reality as a self is dependent on this primary relationship, on the loving response and recognition from an other". The bonds of love between slaves can then be said to affirm one's existence as a human subject as well as to champion the idea of intersubjectivity, an idea that is made impossible by the slave system. Influenced by her reading of the Bible, Katherine Clay Bassard (2014), on the other hand, examines Morrison's mediation on love in all its differing aspects whether it be brotherly, human sexual, and self-sacrificial love. While the critic generally notes that Morrison's works "seek to reclaim love (in any or all of these registers) as an ethical mandate to break the cycle of racism, sexism, and other oppressions," she specifically argues, "in [Morrison's] artistic vision, eros (sexual love) and agape (divine or self-sacrificial love) are either mobilized or disallowed by the presence or the absence of philos (brotherly, community love)".[2] Unlike other critics, Terry Otten notes that the mother's love, its lack, and its distortions are what distinguishes Morrison's works. Seeing love as one of Morrison's major thematic concerns, the critic examines the persistence of love, "its ambiguity, [and] its potential for generating uncompromised compassion and unrestrained violence" (2013). Nonetheless, the critic sees this form of love, no matter how horrific it is, as an explicit and vibrant "testament of freedom" (1993).

While most critics have noted Morrison's celebration of love and read her representation of love in *Beloved* as a benevolent, restorative or emancipatory, and an enabling force that subsequently leads to positively expansive boundaries of self, this paper will embark on a theoretical road less taken by critics of emotion in order to understand love and how it operates in places where it has often been seen as more benevolent or emancipatory. In what follows, the paper reads *Beloved*'s love and its sinister sister, selfishness, as an instance of a racialized affect, an affective revenant that roams and haunts the narrative space of Morrison's novel. My affective reading of *Beloved*'s representation of love and selfishness or -- what I shall call, "Sethesian love" -- will furthermore shed light on how this racialized affect works to critique the discursive practices of exploitation and objectification of the racial other and the so-called freedom

after the emancipation period.[3] In particular, Morrison's textual representation of Sethesian love arguably exemplifies broken and traumatized subjectivity of the racial other during the post-escape life.[4] By racializing self(ish) love as an affect, this paper particularly reads the human body as space, a space in which the human body and self are enslaved and turned against itself by not only the pernicious ghost of the past but also its very own emotions.

In this paper, "Sethesian love" does not simply refer to the love of *Beloved*'s protagonist, Sethe. Rather, the term Sethesian love names a specific and racialized kind of affect and attachment Sethe displays over the course of *Beloved*. To be precise, this Sethesian love is the unlimited love for self that produces strong and intense affection, fear, and selfishness at the moment one is on the brisk of losing his or her subject position or, practically speaking, his or her loved ones.[5] In the case of *Beloved*, Sethe is first explicitly possessed by such affective force when she is cornered in the tool shed by Schoolteacher. In this particular scene, the female protagonist performs an act of infanticide -- an act that, Sethe is convinced, is better than having them snatched back to Kentucky by Schoolteacher. In the following passage, Sethe is looking back at the scene of murder, trying to narrate what has happened on that fateful day and, most importantly, to translate the affective force that drives her to such violence:

> "It was a kind of selfishness I [Sethe] never knew about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. 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".

This particular passage presents a moment of emotional excess that the text or, rather, the linguistic translation itself, fails to describe or contain. There is no question in Sethe's love for her children; however, Morrison does not translate such emotion in a term that we often associate to the experience of love. Instead, Morrison chooses the term "selfishness" to connote Sethe's uncontrollable excess of affection as well as its effect on her subjectivity. In particular, the intensity of Sethesian love exceeds and, subsequently, transforms the linguistic structure or location. This love slips out of the nominal containment of the word "selfishness," and manifests itself as love. However, it should not nonetheless be mistaken for pure love.

On the first denotative level, the term "selfishness" designates an intense, excessive, and self-serving love or care without consideration for others. This expression of heightened love is significantly tinged and increased particularly in this scene by an extreme feeling of fear. However, at the level of connotation, the term "selfishness" also embodies an equally acute sense of self-realization.

Prior to her life in a free state, Ohio, Sethe has no self, no subject position. She is a slave, an objectified property to be sold, owned, and punished by her white owners. Neither is she entitled to her own body, her children, or even her own feelings: "Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down". Therefore, what her supposedly free life in Ohio has granted its first and foremost an opportunity for her to feel whatever she wants to feel there as she is the full owner of both her physical body and her feelings: "It was a kind of selfishness I never knew about before."[6] In other words, her self is triply realized and recognized by Sethe herself in this state of self-ish-ness. Her children can, as a result of such realization, completely belong to her.

While some critics of *Beloved* interpret Morrison as highlighting the ethical value of selflessness by foregrounding "the need to form a collective identity in order to heal wounds caused by racial violence," this particular scene drastically undercuts such ethical value both explicitly and implicitly (Long, 2013). Although the practice of infanticide is commonly regarded in slave narratives as an act that undermines the slave system that denies a slave mother her rightful ownership of her children, *Beloved* seems to go a step further in its critique as well as protest of such a way to reclaim one's status as a human subject as well as a mother. In other words, *Beloved* does not merely set out to undermine the slave system that annihilates black subjectivity through its representation of Sethe's infanticide. Neither is it merely concerned with Sethe's preventive violent act of infanticide. More importantly, what Morrison is concerned in this scene is ethical questions of ownership or entitlement to self and a question of love. Despite its transcendent or restorative power of love, is Sethesian love justified in its operative power to reclaim self? Can a black mother, possessed and persuaded by a strong and violent love, be entitled to act on behalf of her children? To be killed in the name of love? Above all, could the children be disentitled from their own bodies and desire, and completely owned by or subject to their mother?[7]

These ethical questions of ownership and entitlement to self are nicely encapsulated and critiqued in Morrison's use of the word "selfishness." While Otten (1993) suggests that this "horrific love" is in fact Morrison's criticism on "a culture [so] corrupted" and the creation of forces "so brutal that they transform conventional 'signifers' of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love, she maintains that this love, however "malformed and wrenched by the viciousness of a white-dominated culture," is significantly a manifestation of freedom – a state of being free to feel any feeling. However, Morrison's representation of Sethesian love is far from being "a testament of freedom" (Otten, 1993). Instead of being "a testament of freedom," Sethesian love ironically represents a narrative testimony of

enslavement and desubjectification in its reinforcement of that racist practice of objectification and disentitlement.

That is, the emotive experience of magnified love or selfishness is cast at this particular moment in the narrative of *Beloved* not as a proof of humanity but as a proof of a human self whose subjectivity is drastically inflicted and traumatized by race and slavery. However boundless and unlimited this Sethesian love is made to appear, it produces a destructive affection and attachment so delusional and deleterious in a way that could inhibit Sethe's moral consciousness. To be precise, her ethical as well as moral investment concerning the act of infanticide is completely disrupted and suspended at the moment by such affective force of Sethesian love. This suspension of her ethical consciousness is so destructive to the point where she blindly mistakes her children as completely her own. The result is dreadful. The children become disentitled from their own bodies, losing their voice and feeling while they are forced in the tool shed, an effect that eventually loses Sethe more than one of her children.

Not only does Sethesian love hinge upon the idea of oppressive possessiveness and operate blindly without regard to ethical or cognitive responsibilities as discussed above, but it also occurs completely as a reinforcement of the slave system that has triggered it in the first place. If the triggering source of Sethesian love is the slavery-related practice of objectification and oppressive ownership which renders Sethe and each of her family members subjectless and nonhuman, Sethesian love that Sethe expresses at this particular moment, instead of reclaiming the agency of herself as well as of her people by foregrounding her affective capacity to feel, to love, and to own her body, returns Sethe and, in a greater degree, her very own children to the oppressive state of enslavement and subjection by means of disentitlement. By acknowledging her children as extended parts of her body and performing an act of infanticide in the name of rationality-free love, Sethe becomes her children's oppressor. Both the children she births and the children as an extended part of her self(ishness) are ironically reduced in this scene to the status of slaves under the *loving* hands of their own mother.

Sethesian love is so destructive in its possessiveness and disentitlement that it renders what is loved voiceless and, eventually, lifeless. Additionally, the love is so consuming and so powerful that Sethe herself becomes engulfed and powerless in it. It is worth noting that her self is not only enslaved by the pernicious ghost of the past but also by its very own feeling. Her physical body at once becomes imprisoned by that love. As is manifest in the narrative, human body has never been free, neither is it autonomous despite the fact that Sethe escaped from slavery in the South and has now lived in Ohio. Tellingly, the state of enslavement and subjection in Sethe's post-escape life is not only brought upon her by the ghostly Beloved and her painful memory as generally viewed by critics, but also by her own racially inflicted emotions. Her pain runs thus far and deep. It

is not merely physical, psychological, but also affective. What remains powerful and yet less formed is Sethesian love itself: "Something is missing from 124. Something more than Beloved or the red light. He [Paul D] can't put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses. As Morrison has put it, Sethesian love is so powerful and so glaring that in its absence there is a void so palpable that one could feel it. And, even if it is well beyond one's knowing, this racialized affect calls for a recognition; at the same time, it demands a reckoning. In short, since Sethesian love completely operates blindly without regard to morality as well as reinforces the problematic slave system, it has thus become the very tool that paradoxically enslaves the children as well as Sethe in their supposedly free bodies and lives.[8]

Their sense of self is equally disrupted and distorted by such violent affection. As is inherent in the above block quote, Sethesian love or this "selfishness" is narrated in the scene by Sethe as having the ability to obscure as well as expand the physical boundary of a human self. According to Sethe, Sethesian love, in other words, produces an expansion or redefinition of self, an intense expansiveness of self-ish-ness as a human subject. This expansive and redefined boundary of self-ish-ness is exemplified in how Sethe reimagines all of her children as being an extended part of her human self: "I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide." Her self, Sethe is convinced, is now bigger, deeper, and wider, in all its dimensions, and not being limited by any oppressive slave systems. However, the effect of this limitless boundary of self redefined by the language of love on her children is detrimental. Instead of becoming limitless and boundless, her self or her subject position is so distorted to the point of being corrupted by that love she professes to possess. In addition, the affection Sethe displays at this particular moment in the narrative is not love. To be correct, her love is not pure, neither is it benevolent. It is in fact contaminated and soiled with that destructive vision of self. Therefore, at the moment of infanticide when Sethe's supposedly secure subject position is being usurped, she is gripped with fear, with a potential risk of not only losing her children, which are the objects of her love, but also her agency or her own freed body in which the children become the parts that she affectively and, above all, literally considers her own. This is not the state of freedom and power that Sethe presumes she is in. It is, on the contrary, the state of subjection whereby her self, body and emotions are inevitably controlled. It is in this very state that Sethe's sense of self and her agency are dismantled and finally desubjectified.

Although Morrison offers a strong critique of Sethesian love, she also ensures that her characters, especially Sethe, are divorced from this horrendous affect. As earlier discussed in the essay, Sethe merely displays such emotion, but is never the owner of it. Under the circumstances exemplified above, the

protagonist is merely possessed and haunted by the spirit of possessive love. To repudiate such state of possessive love associated to her characters, Morrison externalizes love and selfishness as markedly evident in her characterization of Beloved and the act of possession itself. Firstly, her name, Beloved, indicates a direct and explicit demand to be loved. It hence significantly reinforces the state of an objectified subject, whereby the condition of being loved becomes the very name that gives life to Beloved. This paradoxical subject/object position mirrors Sethe's obscure agency. In one way, she is the owner of her body. She is free to feel any feeling. She can fulfill her duties as a mother, a daughter-in-law, a wife, and a freed individual. All emotions she displays while performing those roles define who she has become. Yet, those emotions are so twisted and so consuming that they themselves turn out to take control over Sethe and eventually displace Sethe from her subject position.

Additionally, as a ghostly embodiment of that possessive love, the character of Beloved does reflect an odd affinity with Sethesian love. For example, having returned from the grave, this ghostly figure is possessive, pernicious, and selfish: "She could bear the hours – nine or ten of them each day but one – when Sethe was gone. Bear even the nights when she was close but out of sight, behind walls and doors lying next to him. But now – even the daylight time that Beloved had counted on, disciplined herself to be content with, was being reduced, divided by Sethe's willingness to pay attention to other things. Him mostly". While Sethe only displays "selfishness" when she is forced under a harsh circumstance, Beloved is twofold self-serving and demanding. Her possessiveness becomes even more destructive when it tries to drive away all those who is passionately connected to Sethe, and entirely regains Sethe as her own. In addition, she is also acrimoniously vindictive as is exemplified in the Clearing scene in which Beloved is trying to strangle Sethe. Apparently, Beloved does not merely desire Sethe's love and attention. As is evident in the Clearing scene, Beloved longs for something more physical and more corporeal than love in order to sustain her and, above all, substitute what she has formerly lost: Sethe's life.

To many critics, the ghostly Beloved emblematizes the forgotten remnant of the past and "the way the traces of the past persists in the present" (Erickson, 2009). In particularly, Ann Hostetler, who explores the presence of ghosts in Morrison's large body of works, argues that the ghostly presence in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* signifies "a silenced past" or "what remains excluded from the narrative" (p. 33).[9] However, Morrison's aim in her representation of Beloved seems to be much more specific. Instead of viewing Beloved as a generalized silenced history of slavery, Beloved is in fact the epitome of oppressive possessiveness and inhuman disentitlement.[10] She is that force which always blindly inserts her destructive and exploitative power in places where it is not her own. She is that unguided love that forces itself on others and reclaims them as her own. Over the course of the novel, this unmitigated spirit has tried countless times to

possess each member of 124 Bluestone Road, the residence of Sethe and her family:

> "Beloved
> You are my sister
> You are my daughter
> You are my face; you are me
> […]
> You went in the water
> I drank your blood
> I brought your milk
> You forgot to smile
> I loved you
> […]
> I waited for you
> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine" (p. 255-6).

The above passage is taken from "I AM BELOVED and she is mine" section, one of *Beloved*'s most convoluted alternate chapters (another notable example of Beloved's possession of others is evident in the 11th section of the novel). Out of the four interior monologue sections, this final monologue chapter homogenizes all the three voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in the most disconcerting way. The quoted passage, for instance, exemplifies such forceful conglomeration and, to a greater degree, an obsessive desire for possession: "You are my sister/ You are my daughter/ You are my face/ You are me" and the refrain "You are mine." This desire or demand to be loved is both excessive and endless as is exemplified in the passage's minimal use of punctuation and period. As a spirit of slave-related practices that refuses to remain dead, Beloved, like Sethe who reconstructs her subjectivity at the scene of infanticide, takes complete control of others in the most destructive way because, as her self becomes limitless and expanded, Sethe, for instance, is growing thinner and thinner, and subsequently loses the ability to speak or walk. This form of possession and disentitlement is as destructive as that of the salve system which denies African American slaves of their rightful status as human subjects.

By externalizing love and selfishness as exemplified in the figure of Beloved, Morrison disowns such affects from her characters. In other words, Beloved is merely the spirit of that slavery-related practices of oppression and disentitlement that journeys from the South to a free state, an affective force that possesses Sethe and produces a violent affection of love and selfishness. It is only at the end of the novel in which an explicit manifestation of communal love and

selflessness occurs that Sethe could finally be rid of the forced state of possessed otherness. To illustrate, after being showered with selfless love from Paul D, Denver, and members of the black community, who come to rescue Sethe from being completely subsumed by Beloved, Sethe regains her strength. And, at the very end of the novel right before the epilogue, Sethe whispers, "'Me? Me?'" This repeated "Me?" not only demonstrates how Paul D restores Sethe to her own self but more significantly emphasizes on a vital moment in which Sethe, for the first time, begins to question her self as a human subject, and more particularly to question her problematic agency. Although the complete process of undoing self is not shown in the narrative and thus not realized by the reader, this initial, suggestive moment of undoing the self hints at a whole new beginning for Sethe, a point from which she can finally be be free, of that frightful past and of that possessive and disabling love.

From my analysis of Sethesian love, it is finally worth noting that Morrison's artistic vision in *Beloved* is best remembered in its mediation on love and how love, wrenched and malformed by the slavery-related practices of possession and disentitlement, enslaves and takes complete control over the body and, above all, a person's sense of self. The African American life and subjectivity Morrison has offered are respectively painful and broken. One may say that *Beloved*'s intricate and complex representation of emotions depicts a specific kind of narrative environment whereby the atrocity of slavery is best realized when the human body is turned against itself. The emotions of love and affection, which are engendered by that Sethesian love, are the pivotal site in which Morrison depicts such situation. Instead of undermining the persistent spirit of slavery-related practices of possession and disentitlement, this affective and autonomous force reinforces subjection and thus desubjectification. The spirit lives, as the novel regrettably reminds us, in the very heart of those it enslaves.

Notes

1. All subsequent references to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (2007) are cited in the text with page number in parenthesis.

2. While both Schapiro and Bassard examine Morrison's representation of love as an emotion that affirms life, Kristin Boudreau (2000), on the other hand, suggests that Morrison's works, especially Beloved, are more concerned with pain as the defining force that regenerates full subjectivity. Her novels, in other words, valorize physical and psychological pain "as the pivotal experience whereby an individual becomes fully human".

3. See also Gretchen Martin (2013). Examining the "deadly benevolences" discourse of race which "were used to rationalize and reinforce racism throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth," the critic argues that Morrison's as well as Faulkner's works demonstrate not only "the denial of black identity as a result of enslavement but the denial of black American's full humanity from the Northern abolitionist perspective as well".

4. For a more detailed discussion of the traumatized effects on the lived experiences of African slaves, see Laurie Vickroy (2015). The critic's take on fiction of trauma is multidisciplinary in order to address a broad and extensive ramifications of trauma represented and contributed by major contemporary writers. Her work highlights both the forces of race on immobilized emotions and the resistant forces of control and homogenization.

5. In Clare Colebrook's "Earth Felt the Wound" (2011), the critic notes that an affect is indeed "a force that would yield an affection…Affects would be 'stand alone' powers, possessing a certain autonomy".

6. While I see emotion or this Sethesian love as the defining force that affirms (as well as destabilizes) life and Sethe's subject position, Lovalerie King (2014) posits, "tangible and intangible property is an essential aspect of American identity and the full expression of liberty". According to King, property ownership, the lack of property, as well as the state of being owned thus become the definitive expression of subjectivity.

7. Vickroy (2000), who voices similar questions, explores the functions of personal spaces and the external forces of racism in the relationships between mothers and children. The critic argues that although external forces of racism as well as its threats have the capacity to distort mothers' love, "daughters' embrace of personal spaces" opens up new possibilities for "reaching beyond those structures of domination which governed their mothers' behavior and conceptions of selfhood".

8. In the essay "Bartleby; or, The Formula," Gilles Deleuze (1997) notes Bartleby's invented, powerful "logic of preference" in his immortal words "I PREFER NOT TO". In the similar way that Beloved's Sethesian love autonomously operates without regard to rationality and morality, Bartleby's

"logic of preference" significantly unseats the narrator's language of rationality. For a more exciting discussion of affect, see also critics of affect as Rei Tereda (2001) and Brian Massumi (1995), whose accounts of affect are predominantly nonsubjective and autonomous. However, unlike Tereda and Massumi, Sianne Ngai (2005) and Sarah Ahmed (2010) do not abide by the rule of autonomous affect.

9. In addition to this reading of the ghostly presence as the silenced past, critics like Susan Corey (2000) and Lisa Hinrichsen (2013) explore how the ghostly presence continues to be operative in the way humans understand and rewrite the notion of reality. Corey, in particular, studies how the ghost, as an otherworldly otherness, "works to pierce conventional versions of reality, and to undermine the status quo and everyday, agreed-upon assumptions, and to explore what we do not understand". See also Juda Bennett (2014) who explores the interconnection between queer sexuality and black identity in Morrison's resurrection of ghosts, and Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert (2009) whose work examines multifaceted narrative conventions in Morrison's canon. Heinert, for instance, argues that in her rejection of formal realism exemplified in *Beloved*'s various generic conventions – slave narrative, history, and the gothic novel, Morrison seeks to undercover a narrative truth that cannot be captured by the cultural logics and values of the dominant culture.

10. Leslie Bickford (2013) asserts that "As a character who is literally three different characters in one, Beloved could be said to be symptomatic of readers' Western ways of thinking". He further states that *Beloved* "is the return of Sethe's repressed fears and memories".

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