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*Beloved*, Beyoncé, and the Burdens Of Our Past: A Critical Examination of Healing From  
Trauma in the African American Gothic

Tyler Perez

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## I. Introduction: “The Past And Present Merge To Meet Us Here”

In the opening moments of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter wades through two worlds, existing in the past and present at once. As the camera cuts between abandoned Southern plantations and starlit city skyscrapers, the constant is always Beyoncé: in the former, she revisits the sites of a centuries-long system that enslaved her ancestors and separated mothers from children; in the latter, Beyoncé, clad in a black hoodie, visually alludes to the death of Trayvon Martin and the repeated murder of Black Americans, a system that, likewise, separates mothers from children. Later in the visual film, Beyoncé closes the gap between this past and present pain with images of Black women sitting inside a plantation mansion holding up photos of their sons who were slain by police: Trayvon Martin appears, as does Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many others, with their mothers’ tear-stricken faces staring into the camera. “Forward,” Beyoncé and James Blake sing as these images play, suggesting a need to create a future from this pain, but not without a critical reexamination of the past, a project *Lemonade* is gravely concerned with. In the film’s first piece of spoken word poetry, Beyoncé espouses *Lemonade*’s de facto thesis on history’s central role in healing — “the past and present merge to meet us here” — a statement which holds particular weight with this scene of women holding photos of the children they lost due to police violence at a site where generations of women prior were separated from their children due to slavery. The past and present merge to meet Beyoncé, and America, here (Knowles-Carter).

The story of Margaret Garner is a particularly devastating case of this legacy of family separation due to racism. In 1855, after escaping slavery with her four children, Garner took refuge with her mother-in-law until her “owner” tracked her down and tried to recapture her. Unwilling to let herself and her children return to the brutality of chattel slavery, Garner killed

one her children and tried to kill the other four (Clemons 43). Garner was soon taken to trial and returned to slavery, eventually being relocated to Louisville. During this relocation, the ferry that was transporting Garner and her infant daughter collided with another boat, causing Garner and her daughter to be thrown into the river. Garner's daughter drowned, and she sought to drown herself (Garrison 47). Garner shortly after died of typhoid after being relocated to a plantation in Mississippi. Like the stories Beyoncé alludes to in *Lemonade*, Garner is a victim of family separation as a result of a racist institution, and despite Garner's experience being lost to history for about a hundred years, Toni Morrison retells Garner's story in *Beloved* through the fictional lens of Sethe, a woman who similarly kills her infant daughter to prevent her family's recapture into slavery (Morrison xvii). Where Morrison takes creative liberties as an author — and where she, like Beyoncé, critically engages with the legacy of the past into the present — is in her ability to imagine Garner's psychological state and personal life twenty years after the infanticide, demonstrating how past injustices and traumas continue to haunt their victims long after the painful event has passed. As Morrison states in the preface to *Beloved*, she took “the historical Margaret Garner” and “would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's ‘place’” — in doing so, she creates Sethe, a woman whose guilt over her daughter's death and trauma from years of violent, sexual exploitation while enslaved manifests into psychological torture, social isolation, and literal haunting from the ghost of her undead daughter (Morrison vxii).

Despite being created nearly thirty years apart, *Beloved* and *Lemonade* are remarkably similar historical projects: both texts critically engage with America's legacy of systemic racism to explore how past injustices create present-day inequality, arguing that the racist institutions

that slavery was founded on did not disappear with the Emancipation Proclamation but instead continue to dramatically affect the everyday lives of people of color decades and centuries later. Both Morrison and Beyoncé allegorize this argument in their respective texts: in *Beloved*, Sethe acts as a microcosm for Reconstruction-era Black Americans grappling with the omnipresent effects of slavery's legacy less than two decades after the end of the Civil War; whereas in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses her personal experience coming to terms with her husband's infidelity as a way to examine racism's effect on the Black family throughout American history. In both cases, this allegory serves as each woman's proposed guide for personal and national healing in a country haunted by its racist past and present, and in both texts, the essential question becomes how to create a more just future from the wreckage of an unjust past — how to move “forward,” as Beyoncé sings in *Lemonade*'s emotional peak. The critical difference, however, is in how each author's historical project merges the past and present and the largely different conclusions they come to as a result. This paper will focus on these differences between *Beloved* and *Lemonade*'s engagement with the past as a vessel for understanding the present through a comparative analysis of these texts' functions as projects for personal healing, literary storytelling, and historical reexamination. First, I will explore the texts' unique differences in medium and structure, paying attention to how the merging of past and present becomes an essential part of the storytelling process for each author. Second, I will contextualize each text within the legacy of African American Gothic literature, focusing on how the texts' interest in Gothic symbols and motifs — especially ghosts and haunting — further blend past and present in ways that dramatically impact each story. Third, I will examine how each author uses water and fire as competing symbols for different processes of healing, connecting each to the texts' shared fascination with memory as a means of reintegrating the past into the present. Finally, I will

demonstrate how the conclusions each author comes to about how to approach personal and national healing in the context of systemic racism lead to vastly different paths for establishing a more just future, and I will argue that *Lemonade* puts forth a much more definitive model for healing with the past than *Beloved*, which offers an inconclusive position that is more in line with the complexities that arise from this question.

## II. “Nothing Ever Dies”: Past and Present in *Beloved* and *Lemonade*

Despite their shared thematic focus and literary function, *Beloved* and *Lemonade* are dramatically different in their medium. While *Beloved* is a novel with brief detours into free verse poetry, *Lemonade* is a visual album: an amalgamation of music, poetry, and film which, when synthesized, create a piece of art that transcends any one medium or categorization. When speaking about *Lemonade*, one approach could be to analyze the album’s music and lyrics in isolation from these other factors, which would focus exclusively on the story of Beyoncé’s marital troubles as it plays out over the record’s twelve songs. However, this approach fails to recognize the significance of the film’s visual and poetic elements, which not only add depth to this personal story but recontextualize it within the history of American slavery. Specific lyrics and themes within the record’s songs gain new meaning as they are paired with film and poetry. Additionally, given that *Lemonade* was first premiered as the visual album exclusively — with the record of songs being released shortly after — to examine the music separate from the film and poetry would be disingenuous to the artist’s intended vision for the project. Therefore, this paper will consider all of the elements in *Lemonade* as essential portions of the text, and my comparisons between *Lemonade* and *Beloved* are prefaced with an understanding that their difference in medium leads to important distinctions in how each author tells their story. In

*Beloved*, for example, the medium of the novel allows Morrison to tell a clearer, more straightforward narrative that follows traditional plot structure, although Morrison subverts this structure radically throughout *Beloved* by shifting between the novel's present day of 1873 and varying times in the past, spanning from as early as Baby Suggs' freedom from Sweet Home in the 1830s to the months following Sethe's infanticide in the late 1850s. At some points, entire chapters take place in the past, whereas other chapters may shift rapidly between past and present with little to no warning from the author. This situates *Beloved* as an intersection of sorts between past and present, and the novel's tension arises from the increasing detail about Sethe's infanticide that come through flashbacks from different characters' perspectives. On the other hand, *Lemonade*'s medium still allows Beyoncé the opportunity to tell a concrete story — that of her husband's infidelity, as it plays out in the lyrics, poetry, and some visuals from the film — but the film's visual scenes tell an accompanying story where Beyoncé drowns, is reborn as Oshun (a Yoruba goddess of fertility, love, and female sensuality), and undergoes a process of healing with the help of a chorus of Black women. This creates what Patricia Coloma Peñate refers to as a “circular chronicle” based on a “juxtaposition of simultaneous scenes that take place in different timelines, but appear to be happening at once” (112-113). While the personal story is more concrete than this mythological one that plays out in the film's visuals, neither is nearly as detailed as the story Morrison tells in *Beloved* as a result of the confines of the medium.

This difference in detail does not dramatically impact how *Lemonade* critically engages with the past, although the methods of this engagement are nonetheless different from *Beloved*. Whereas Morrison uses flashbacks and memories to revive past experiences and contextualize them alongside scenes that take place in the present, making the past an integral part of the story in *Beloved*, references to the past in *Lemonade* most often come through visual allusions rather

than direct recreations of past scenes. Beyoncé and her chorus of women spend a considerable portion of the film on and around Southern plantations, which are a direct reference to the history of slavery that oppressed the generations of women before them — women like Sethe and Margaret Garner. At certain points in the film, Beyoncé returns to places from her personal past, like Houston, Texas, during the video for “Daddy Lessons” and her parents’ native New Orleans in the closing song, “Formation.” In the former song, Beyoncé retells her difficult relationship with her father growing up, including his infidelity to Beyoncé’s mother, and how the advice he gave Beyoncé as a child is relevant to her present conflict with her husband — Beyoncé even includes video footage of her as a child with her father, establishing an intersection of past and present in the film’s events. Nonetheless, these connections between past and present are much looser and less story-based than in *Beloved*. This does not mean that *Lemonade* is somehow a less significant historical project than *Beloved*: rather, it demonstrates that examining *Lemonade*’s engagement with the past requires greater focus on the film’s visual references to the past than on direct interplay between past and present in the story.

As a result of its medium, *Beloved* has certain textual elements that allow it to engage with the past at a more micro level than *Lemonade*. A key example of this is Morrison’s use of verb tense, which determines whether a scene takes place in the novel’s past, present, or future. While most of the novel is written in past tense, suggesting that all of these events have already happened (as, in the case on Margaret Garner, they have), *Beloved* occasionally shifts into brief moments of present tense, indicating that not only are the events happening in the novel’s present, but the reader’s present, as well, as they interrupt the narrative’s primarily past tense basis. A critical example of this shifting verb tense comes after Morrison reflects on Denver’s disinterest with a past that does not include her, saying instead that “the present alone interested

Denver,” followed by an abrupt shift from past to present verb tense, perhaps to align the form of the writing with the themes that underlie it (140-142). Similarly, when Paul D remembers his failed escape from Sweet Home, the verb tense changes from past to present for the remainder of the scene, representing the degree to which this memory is ingrained in Paul D’s “tobacco tin” heart, so much so that he experiences it as a part of his present despite the escape taking place almost twenty years prior (Morrison 86, 261-270). In considering the novel’s focus on exploring how past events continue to haunt individuals years and decades after they have occurred, this shift in verb tense with Paul D is a critical moment for Morrison to demonstrate the psychological burden that racist systems inflict on their victims for their entire lives — the way that it disrupts Paul D’s reality and, for us as the reader, confronts us in our present by disrupting a narrative we expect to take place entirely in the past. These authorial choices that Morrison makes allow the novel’s formal elements to augment the themes and ideas explored within the story’s plot, creating an interplay between content and form wherein variations in form directly affect the novel’s meaning. This allows Morrison to establish a foundation for past and present to intersect at a metatextual level in the same way that Sethe experiences this in her own narrative arc, and it offers a major distinction between the way *Beloved* and *Lemonade* are able to incorporate the past into their stories as they take place in the present.

One other distinction in this past-present interplay separates *Beloved* from *Lemonade* in a major way, and that is how directly each text’s present day reflects the author’s present day. Both texts engage with a distant past from some time during the Antebellum era — *Beloved* looks at the period of 1830-1855 specifically, whereas *Lemonade* makes allusions to the broader period of American slavery with no concrete span of years in mind — but their present-day settings could not be more different. *Lemonade*’s present day takes place at the same time of its release, 2016,

whereas *Beloved* takes place in 1873, more than a century prior to its publication in 1987. This creates a major difference between each text's approach to the past-present dynamic: in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé makes direct connections between the chattel slavery of the Antebellum era and the racial inequality of present-day America by switching between these two periods in its visual references and storylines; on the other hand, Morrison's *Beloved* makes indirect connections between her present day of 1987 by using the novel's 1873 as a point of comparison for a period immediately following an era where Black people made significant gains toward freedom. By situating *Beloved* during the middle of the Reconstruction era, a period where Black Americans struggled to find economic stability, political power, and legal protections from enraged white Southerners following the abolition of slavery, Morrison looks at how the vestiges of slavery continued to haunt America even after the institution legally ended. This is in line with her theme for the novel, which surrounds the legacy of trauma long after the painful event has ended. Likewise, the novel's publication date, 1987, comes two decades after the Civil Rights Movement, a period of immense social change for Black Americans and the legal end of Jim Crow — nevertheless, like 1873, racist institutions, policies, and practices continued to plague the nation (particularly the rise of mass incarceration) despite the legal end of a racist institution. By making these connections between the Antebellum era, the Reconstruction era, and the post-Civil-Rights-Movement era, Morrison establishes that the racism that slavery was built on did not simply vanish with the Emancipation Proclamation, but rather that it continued to haunt American history through the Reconstruction and the Jim Crow eras, through the Civil Rights Movement, and into the latter half of the twentieth century — and Beyoncé, by connecting police violence in 2016 to the institution of slavery in the Antebellum era, shows us that this racism continues to impact the nation today.

### III. “Nothing Ever Dies”: Gothic, Ghosts, and Rememory

In her preface to *Beloved*, Morrison describes inviting her reader to Sethe’s “repellant landscape” of “shame and terror” as pitching “a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (Morrison xvii). Haunting factors heavily into the world Morrison creates in *Beloved*: in a literal sense, the characters are haunted by a baby ghost that has inhabited their home and the titular Beloved, who is a physical, tangible ghost, and in a metaphorical sense, they are haunted by the painful memories of their traumatic experiences from a life of slavery. Likewise, in the sections “Apathy” and “Emptiness” from *Lemonade*, Beyoncé details how her less-than-public miscarriages have created “ghosts” whose blood is tilled “in and out of uterus,” causing grief that can only be “sedated by orgasm, orgasm heightened by grief” (Knowles-Carter). Beyoncé imagines herself as a ghost, too — “here lies the mother of my children,” she says of herself, “both living and dead” — who has been killed by her disloyal husband “without a gun to my head” (Knowles-Carter). *Lemonade* as a whole seems to be told from the perspective of an undead Beyoncé who is being reborn through the communal healing process, while *Beloved* similarly focuses on a communal healing process initiated by the arrival of the ghost Beloved. In each case, the Gothic genre is a central way that each text connects the past to the present, most significantly through the symbol of the ghost as the manifestation of past memories.

While definitions of the Gothic vary as radically as the numerous texts within the genre, Jerrold Hogle argues that two of the constant features of the Gothic are a setting within an “antiquated or seemingly antiquated place” and, within this space, hidden “secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at

the main time of the story” (2). “Antiquated” here can refer to the home Sethe and her family inhabit, 124 Bluestone Road, which was passed down from Sethe’s mother-in-law and, before her, an abolitionist couple that used the house as a way-station on the Underground Railroad; or it could refer to the plantations that Beyoncé and her chorus of women reclaim throughout *Lemonade*. In both cases, the haunting that Sethe and Beyoncé experience stems from the physical setting itself, as Hogle notes in his definition of the Gothic. In *Beloved*, this is most obvious in that 124 is clearly labeled as a haunted house: as early as the first few pages of the novel, Morrison establishes that the ghost of Sethe’s undead baby has haunted 124 and its inhabitants for at least several years, describing it as “a house palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut” (Morrison 6). This arises from the fact that the infanticide occurred within 124’s woodshed: thus, even if the ghost did not exist, Sethe would still be figuratively haunted by the memory of this traumatic experience, which is inextricably tied to the setting in which it took place. When Beloved arrives a few chapters later as the physical manifestation of the then-exorcized ghost, she appears on the steps of 124, almost never leaving the house throughout the course of the novel. Carol Schumde argues that 124 is “a necessary condition of Beloved’s appearance, and it also is a condition of her interaction with the other characters of the novel,” such that “the house shapes and the ghost gives expression to their own repressed inner conflicts,” thus allowing this haunting to manifest the “secrets from the past” that Hogle argues is a staple of the Gothic genre (Schumde 412; Hogle 2). Ghosts in *Beloved* enact an integration of the past within the present by reviving a dead entity years, decades, or even centuries after their passing. Throughout *Beloved*, Morrison establishes a dichotomy between the worlds of the living and the dead — and by extension, the past and the present — and Beloved destroys the barrier between these worlds when she crosses “the bridge” to find Sethe (77, 253). Ghosts like

Beloved are, “unlike mortals, invulnerable to barriers of time, space, and place,” Deborah Horvitz argues, and by framing her historical fiction within the Gothic genre and its interest in the supernatural, Morrison is able to converge the past and present worlds into one narrative, demonstrating how past events impact and “possess” the present (Horvitz 157).

By the same token, whereas the haunting in *Lemonade* is less literal than that of *Beloved*, the “antiquated” plantations of the visual album’s setting similarly evoke the haunting of secrets both buried and uncovered. J. Brendan Shaw notes that “plantations linger in the public consciousness as markers of racist pasts” that are “not simply a remnant of a barbaric system but also the literal product of that system, built from the forced labor of the enslaved” (120-121). Thus, when Beyoncé and her chorus of women walk, march, and twerk through the plantation mansion and its vast green space, they are interacting not only with the site where generations of Black people were brutalized, exploited, and separated from their families, but with the product of this brutality, exploitation, and separation. The trauma and pain that is inherent to our collective memory of these sites is connected to them because that trauma and pain built those sites. As Alan Brown notes in the introduction to his collection of Southern ghost stories, the legacy of slavery is a “major distinguishing element of Southern ghost stories,” which is understandable given the sheer magnitude of death, violence, and family separation that chattel slavery brought to these plantation sites (xxix). In this way, while no literal ghosts appear in *Lemonade*’s visual album — other than the aforementioned references to herself and her miscarried children as ghosts — in the same way that ghosts factor into *Beloved*, Beyoncé and her chorus of women are interacting with the implied ghosts of these plantation sites throughout the course of the film. Nonetheless, the haunting is still present in *Lemonade*: these plantations are remnants of a racist system which irreparably shaped American history and generations of

Black families up to Beyoncé's own, and as she interacts with these spaces over the course of *Lemonade*, the reader cannot help but assume that this system is haunting Beyoncé's own story.

Haunting also occurs in both texts through a less literal medium than ghosts: memory. Memories in *Beloved* eliminate the threshold between past and present in less active and obvious manners than ghosts, which could be interpreted as the manifestation of memories in physical and non-physical forms. Throughout the novel, Morrison focuses on remembering as a critical way that her characters hold on to the past: Sethe is consumed by memories of her time at Sweet Home and the day she killed her daughter to keep her from returning to slavery; by the same token, Paul D is frequently haunted by memories of the brutality, dehumanization, and emasculation he experienced while enslaved. In the scope of *Beloved's* story, these memories disrupt the linear narrative of the novel's present day by oscillating between past and present, with the entirety of chapters ten, fifteen, and sixteen taking place in the past. This allows the novel's "characters, author, and readers [to] delve into the past, repeating painful stories to work toward the health of fuller awareness," Caroline Rody argues (99). Morrison explores how memory mediates the relationship between past and present through her concept of "rememory," a term Sethe uses to explain how memory operates within her mind:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world... I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened (Morrison 43).

In this passage and elsewhere in *Beloved*, Morrison imagines memory as a “picture” that exists eternally, even if the person who the memory belongs to passes away. When Denver asks Sethe “If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies,” Sethe looks directly in her daughter’s face and says “Nothing ever does,” suggesting that memories, similar to ghosts, are invulnerable to the passage of time, and like ghosts, they allow the past to return to the present, eliminating the barrier between these worlds (Morrison 44). Rody posits that for Sethe and Morrison alike, rememory is the ability to “use one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past,” a past which Sethe argues never truly dies — stories like Margaret Garner’s, as told through Sethe, remain relevant and influential a century later, and through these fictionalized memories, Morrison is able to establish this “abiding connection to the past” for herself and her reader (101). Morrison’s interest in the past and its significance within the present is evident through her small- and large-scale authorial choices that blend past and present not only within the novel’s plot but in *Beloved*’s existence itself: the novel transports its reader across space and time and asks them to reflect on events from a century prior are essential to understand today. Through this exploration of time in the novel’s narrative, motifs, and authorial choices, Morrison establishes a framework where the barriers between past, present, and future are less fixed than we imagine them, and this allows her to tell a story about how the past lives on in the present, consuming, haunting, and never dying.

Memory also factors heavily into *Lemonade*’s story, as is expected from a text that is largely autobiographical in nature. In the section “Accountability,” for example, with the aforementioned song “Daddy Lessons,” Beyoncé relies on memories of advice given to her as a child as a means to make sense of her present-day conflict with her husband. Images from her memory, be it the scenes of idyllic Houston or clips of her as a child with her father, disrupt the

forward-moving momentum of the film's narrative, demonstrating the necessity of looking to the past as a means of understanding crises in the present. "Right before he died, he said remember," Beyoncé sings, affirming that her father's warning "about men like you" and admonition to "take care of your mother" and "watch out for your sister" is the key to her identity crisis in the wake of her husband's infidelity (Knowles-Carter). Beyoncé is aware of the importance of looking backwards in order to move forwards: in a rare interview two years after *Lemonade*'s release, Beyoncé told *Vogue* "I come from a lineage of broken male-female relationships, abuse of power, and mistrust. Only when I saw that clearly was I able to resolve those conflicts in my own relationship. Connecting to the past and knowing our history makes us both bruised and beautiful" ("Beyoncé In Her Own Words"). This dichotomy of "bruised and beautiful" is at the core of how memory functions in *Lemonade*: in sections like "Accountability," memory serves as a vital tool in the healing process, as Beyoncé uses memories from this "lineage of broken male-female relationships" to understanding her history and "resolve those conflicts in my own relationship." But in other parts of the film, memory, like in *Beloved*, is painful. In the opening song of *Lemonade*, "Pray You Catch Me," Beyoncé sings "nothing else seems to hurt like the smile on your face when it's only in my memory," as the smile represents a past happiness in Beyoncé's relationship that no longer exists in reality (Knowles-Carter). Like Sethe's image of her husband losing his sanity with his face smeared in butter, the image of her husband's no-longer-existent smile drives Beyoncé to an incomparable level of hurt (Morrison 80-84). On a macro level, the film's visual references to chattel slavery through its plantation iconography echo memories of generational hurt inflicted upon the enslaved people who built those sites. In considering Sethe's concept of "rememory" within *Beloved*, Coloma Peñate argues:

This pointing out of a particular site as the embodiment of trauma calls for memories that are orally and genetically transmitted. Places that played an important role during a historical time are capable of narrating stories even if they are not occupied because in remembering the history of a community, of its forebears, some of their memories become one's own (116).

Despite the fact that neither Beyoncé nor her chorus of women nor the viewer themselves, were participants or victims in the chattel slavery that these plantations were built upon, their mere presence within the visual album echoes the stories, both told and untold, from the generations of enslaved people who created the plantations. As such, their memories become Beyoncé's own memories, and she feels their generational pain. In the same way that memories eliminate the barrier between past and present within *Beloved*, Beyoncé's personal and inherited memories integrate the past into *Lemonade*'s present in ways that impel the central healing process.

#### IV. "Anything Dead Coming Back To Life Hurts": Healing in *Beloved* and *Lemonade*

In the final moments of *Beloved*, Sethe sits alone in 124, defeated, exhausted, and unable to move forward. "I don't have any plans," she tells Paul D when he returns to the home after being gone for months, "no plans at all" (Morrison 320). Having spent the past eighteen years consumed by her past mistakes and trauma, Sethe is suddenly lost without Denver and Beloved. Without them, Sethe cannot make sense of her life in the present, and she can barely imagine a future until Paul D returns and she can "cry and tell him things they only told each other" (Morrison 321). Sethe sees a man whose presence can help her heal; Paul D sees a woman who

can gather “the pieces I am... and give them back to me in the right order” (Morrison 321). Together, the two can heal from their past and build their own future. “Sethe,” Paul D says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Morrison 322).

Similarly, in the penultimate section of *Lemonade*, titled “Hope,” Beyoncé finds an opportunity for healing in the presence of her family:

The nail technician pushed my cuticles back, turns my hand over, stretches the skin on my palm and says, “I see your daughters and their daughters.” That night in a dream, the first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals into a smile. The man I love pulls the stitches out with his fingernails (Knowles-Carter).

Like Sethe, Beyoncé sees her romantic partner as a tool in her healing process, despite the fact that her husband was the impetus for the pain Beyoncé must heal from. “With every tear came redemption, and my torturer became my remedy,” she sings on the accompanying song “All Night,” echoing this belief that true healing comes from a direct confrontation with the source of the initial pain (Knowles-Carter). This approach to healing dominates Beyoncé’s philosophy in the final sections of *Lemonade*, as she posits that “true love’s the greatest weapon to win the war caused by pain,” a sentiment Sethe would likely agree with in the final moments of *Beloved* (Knowles-Carter). This approach to healing through individual relationships with male romantic partners in both *Beloved* and *Lemonade* offers one method of reconciliation, but in neither text is it a complete or comprehensive representation of the tools each woman uses to achieve a healthy relationship with past trauma, even if it completes their individual narratives. What, then, is the healing process for Sethe and Beyoncé?

For both women, the internal conflict that they must resolve in order to fully heal stems from a need to effectively confront and learn from their past in order to build a more just future for themselves and their children. In both texts, this creates a dichotomous relationship between past and present that each woman must mediate in the present, and this responsibility is not a simple one. Take, for example, Sethe. If she remains preoccupied by the past, she and Denver will stay secluded from the outside world, living the rest of their lives in a day-to-day isolation that will inhibit their ability to form lasting connections with others and a life outside of 124. If she outright forgets her past — or “disremembers” it, as Morrison says — she will lose her abiding connections to the people she has loved and lost, like her children, husband, and mother-in-law. Thus, Sethe, at least at the beginning of *Beloved*, sees the future as “a matter of keeping the past at bay,” or trying everything she can to prevent herself or her daughter from reliving “the past that was still waiting for her,” representing a simultaneous preoccupation with and deep fear of the past (Morrison 51). Absorbed by the past, so much so that it dictates how she lives her present, Sethe loses the ability to determine her own future for more than a few days, continuing to allow her past trauma and mistakes to define it for her. This is particularly devastating given the way in which slavery deprives individuals of their right to determine their own future — a right Sethe was supposed to be entitled to after escaping Sweet Home and arriving at 124. Sethe describes the twenty-eight days between her arrival at 124 and the day she killed her daughter as “days of healing, ease, and real-talk” during which Sethe “claimed herself,” a sharp contrast from the loss of identity that she and others experienced under slavery (Morrison 111). Sethe’s interactions with others in particular act as a form of healing, as she relishes in “feeling their fun and sorrow along with their own, which made it better,” the same sort of feeling she has with Paul D, where they both only feel comfortable speaking about their

trauma with each other given their shared histories (Morrison 111). Even years down the line, Sethe reflects on what she lost socially as a result of the infanticide:

The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own — all that was long gone and would never come back... Those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life (Morrison 204).

This brief moment of what Sethe calls “unslaved life” could have represented the beginning of a larger process of healing for her, but when schoolteacher and his slave-catchers arrive at 124, Sethe’s fear of the past consumes her — justifiably so, some may argue — and drive her to kill her daughter to protect her, sending Sethe to prison alongside Denver, ostracizing her from the neighborhood women, and ultimately putting a stop to her healing process altogether (Morrison 111).

Eighteen years later, *Beloved* finds Sethe still consumed by this event and the countless other traumatic experiences that have ingrained themselves into her memory. Sethe’s complacency in her isolation — regardless of her daughter’s dissatisfaction with it — makes her either unable or unwilling to holistically confront the trauma she has endured, choosing to avoid remembering her most painful trauma without resolving her need to find closure with her dead daughter. Enter *Beloved*. While the reader cannot be absolutely certain that *Beloved* is the reincarnation of Sethe’s dead daughter, the fact that Sethe and others project this identity onto the mysterious girl who arrives at 124 is perhaps more significant than who she really is. To Sethe, *Beloved* is the embodiment of the daughter she lost eighteen years ago and, in grander terms, a conduit for the past — someone who is unconsciously aware of Sethe’s trauma and mistakes, which allows Sethe to avoid explaining the details of these memories. “I have to remember

nothing,” Sethe tells herself after realizing that Beloved is her daughter, “I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (Morrison 216). Beloved’s introduction into Sethe’s life allows Sethe to remain in a state of simultaneous longing for lost past connections and fear of the past resurging in ways that threaten her family, a somewhat paradoxical feeling that defined her life in a haunted house for years before Paul D or Beloved arrived. Beloved converges the two halves of this complicated relationship to the past into one entity that both allows Sethe to remain close to her past while physically and psychologically threatening herself and Denver — in the novel’s final chapters, Morrison portrays Sethe and Beloved in an exploitative and toxic relationship where Beloved solicits stories from Sethe’s past as a form of nourishment, consequently making Sethe weaker and smaller while still begging her undead daughter for forgiveness. Early in the novel, Morrison establishes storytelling as a means by which Sethe can “feed” Beloved, as Beloved expresses “profound satisfaction” at hearing Sethe recount experiences from her past (69-70). Knowing Sethe’s complicated attitude toward the past — the fact that “every mention of her past hurt” and “everything in it was painful and lost” — it becomes clear early on Sethe’s storytelling benefits Beloved more than Sethe herself, even if she initially finds it to be a pleasurable way to share “unspeakable” stories about her past (Morrison 69). Only a few moments later, for example, Beloved’s need for stories causes Sethe to unearth a traumatic repressed memory of her mother being hanged, which briefly paralyzes Sethe “because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew” (Morrison 73). After several months with Beloved, Sethe grows increasingly wearier as a result of this exploitative relationship:

The more she [Beloved] took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children... Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant

more to her than her own life... The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became..

Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it (Morrison 284-285, 294-295).

This toxic relationship between Sethe and Beloved drives Sethe to abandon her job, causing the women of 124 to go hungry until Denver intervenes and finds employment on her own with Ella and Edward Bodwin, the original owners of 124. After telling Ella about Beloved's role in her mother's dwindling physical and mental state, Ella also imagines Beloved as Sethe's killed daughter, and she immediately recognizes the danger of Sethe's situation. "Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present," Morrison writes, "the future was sunset; the past something to leave behind... She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (302). This idea of "past errors taking possession of the present" effectively summarizes the central conflict Sethe has had to navigate throughout the novel, and it is through this exploitative relationship with Beloved that Sethe's past begins to possess her — both in terms of how her past owns and defines her present and how the haunting she experienced with the ghost of 124 escalates into full-on possession through Beloved. By the time Ella and others seemingly exorcise Beloved from the material world and she is slowly forgotten by the people who once knew her, Sethe is in a state of near-death with "no plans at all," struggling to imagine a future for herself until Paul D offers to help her put aside her "yesterday" and build a greater "tomorrow" together (Morrison 320-322).

Nevertheless, despite the significant pain that Beloved inflicts upon Sethe as the novel develops, this relationship is not a wholly exploitative one. In fact, some aspects of their relationship yield positive, if not marginally beneficial, growth for Sethe by allowing her to apologize to her daughter through Beloved and seek closure with her past mistake. Before

Beloved's entrance into the novel, Sethe's inability to apologize to her daughter and "make it clear to her" creates an unresolvable conflict for Sethe that keeps her emotionally tethered to 124, where the ghost of her daughter acts as a stand-in for the child that Sethe is unable to make amends with (Morrison 5). Morrison notes that "words whispered in the keeping room had kept her [Sethe] going" while she lived with the ghost, and these same words — her "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" — help her grow and confront her trauma once Beloved replaces the ghost (101, 235). Horvitz argues that Beloved facilitates "a metamorphosis in Sethe that allows her to speak what she had thought to be unspeakable," allowing her to voice the words she needs to say to seek closure (158). Sethe projects her daughter's identity onto Beloved in order to voice her apologies and seek forgiveness from her daughter, regardless of whether Beloved is actually her child. In fact, through these apologies, Sethe is able to, at least temporarily, forget her most significant trauma and avoid explaining the context of the situation to Beloved because "she understands already" (Morrison 236). As Morrison writes, Sethe's "mind was very busy with the things she could forget" as Sethe thinks to herself, "Thank God I don't have to rememory or say anything because you know it. You know I never would a left you. Never. It was all I could think to do" (226). Through her relationship to Beloved, Sethe is able to temporarily purge one of the significant unresolved conflicts in her life, but the conflict remains unresolved as time moves forward and Beloved continues rejecting Sethe's apologies. Thus, Beloved's presence in Sethe's life yields marginal benefits toward her growth over the course of the novel by giving her an opportunity to voice her "unspeakable thoughts" and to seek closure from a stand-in for the real person she needs to apologize to but cannot.

Through this complicated relationship between Sethe and Beloved, Morrison demonstrates how making amends with one's past is a challenging and painful process that

cannot be easily resolved through simply forgetting the past. On a personal level, Sethe undergoes a universal process of grieving from trauma and the loss of a loved one, as Olivia McNeely Pass argues that Sethe — and vicariously, the reader — undergoes Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grieving — denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — throughout the course of *Beloved* (Pass 117-118). Sethe's process of accepting the death of her daughter nearly twenty years prior requires that she let go of her past in order to move forward and “finally be whole” — however, Morrison's novel complicates Pass' reduction of the narrative to a one-to-one parallel with Kubler-Ross' model, as *Beloved* demonstrates the danger that comes from letting the past go altogether (Pass 124).

Likewise, *Lemonade* offers another approach to healing that rejects the notion of forgetting the past altogether. As Beyoncé states in her Vogue interview, it is only through recognizing her “lineage of broken male-female relationships” that she was able to resolve the conflicts in her own relationship (“Beyoncé In Her Own Words”). Within the context of the film's references to plantation slavery, one could apply Beyoncé's philosophy here to a need to study the injustices of the past in order to comprehend racial inequality within the present, offering a dual process for personal and national healing. However, despite this rejection of forgetting the past, much of Beyoncé's approach to healing in *Lemonade* differs from the method Morrison lays out for Sethe. Whereas Sethe's internal conflict stems from a need to forgive herself for the infanticide as well as fully process the trauma she endured at Sweet Home, Beyoncé's internal conflict is based in her fears about her “lineage of broken male-female relationships” disrupting her family's peace and repeating in her children's future. Thus, she must confront the source of the pain that is haunting her: for example, her disloyal husband, the infidelities of the other men in her family, the generations of broken relationships before her, and

through it all, the racist systems that affect all of these. This creates a “curse” that Beyoncé is responsible for breaking: on one hand, she could allow this legacy of broken relationships to destroy her marriage and family, causing her children to repeat this pattern in future generations; or, on the other hand, she could seek meaning in her trauma through a critical examination of her personal and ancestral past in ways that create a greater future for herself, her children, and their descendants (Knowles-Carter). Beyoncé is given lemons, and she makes *Lemonade*.

Whereas *Lemonade*'s lyrics in isolation would suggest her process of healing came exclusively through reconciliation with her partner, the film's poetry and visual motifs indicate that several other factors played a role in this healing by facilitating Beyoncé's movement toward the grand resolution with her husband. The earliest source of healing for Beyoncé is rebirth: during the first two sections of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé sinks into a vast sea of water and is reborn into Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of love, fertility, and female sensuality, as she channels the most destructive and unhealthy emotions of the early healing process. By using water as the vessel for her rebirth, Beyoncé channels an element that “represents a literal or symbolic return to the Atlantic Ocean waters which are part of the ancestral past and collective memory” — not too unlike Beloved's birth from the nameless waters she emerges from prior to arriving at 124 (Coloma Peñate 116). Through channeling Oshun, a goddess with a “malevolent and tempestuous temper,” Beyoncé moves through the film's earliest sections, which are appropriately titled according to her emotions: “Denial” sees Beyoncé wreaking destruction on public property; “Anger” finds her hurling invectives at her cheating lover, channeling a “dragon breathing fire”; and “Apathy” shows an emotionless Beyoncé seeking fulfillment through hedonism (Coloma Peñate 116; Knowles-Carter). Shaw describes the healing process in this first half of the visual album as “elemental destruction” designed to “fight back against the past,”

creating fires that are “both chaotic and cleansing” (121-122). Shaw contrasts this with the “more settled version of engagement in the past” in the latter half of the visual album, which is characterized by “engagement with the built environment and natural surroundings of the plantation” where the chorus of “women choose to return to this space on their own terms to build community and heal” (121-122). In “Accountability,” she finds advice on reconciliation from the lessons her father imparted; in “Reformation” and “Forgiveness,” she confronts her lover, the immediate source of her pain, and pleads to build a new beginning from the wreckage his mistakes brought to their relationship; in “Resurrection,” she wages war on the racist systems that underpin her past and present pain; and in “Hope” and “Redemption,” she dedicates herself to the future she has created for herself and her family, a future based on the philosophy that “true love is the greatest weapon to win the war caused by pain” (Knowles-Carter). In their introduction to *The Lemonade Reader*, editors Kinitra D. Brooks and Kameelah L. Martin describe this “blueprint for healing” as encouraging Black women to

- 1) Go home — as we see her return to her Louisiana roots, to her mother’s people; 2) Go to water — we see this in the latter half as Beyoncé returns to the natural world, pays homage to Ibo landing, and chooses the swamp to create a maroon colony of Black women; 3) Heal with other women — the end of *Lemonade* shows Beyoncé recovering her freedom in the midst of generations of Black women, both living and on the ancestral plane (3).

This approach to reconciliation comes through a communal healing with the chorus of women that surround her throughout the film’s events, a chorus which features prominent Black women such as Serena Williams, Zendaya, Quvenzhané Wallis, Chloe x Halle, and countless others. Early in the visual album, these women, and Beyoncé herself for a brief period, are decorated

with Ori face painting, a tradition that “visualizes personal history by marking ethnographic origins” (Coloma Peñate 118). The women accompany Beyoncé throughout her process of healing, in its most destructive moments, like those that characterize the visual album’s first half, as well as her healthier movements toward reconciliation in the latter half. As Beyoncé paces through the interior and exterior worlds of plantation life, these women follow and support her as she undergoes her personal process of healing, and in doing so, the women presumably undergo their own processes of healing as well. As Avery Gordon notes, community is an essential part of the healing process, as “the community must be present because without it, you’ve got no place to go when you’re better” — in other words, had Beyoncé sought healing independently, not only would she lack the communal support from this chorus of women throughout the healing process, but she would remain tethered exclusively to her partner after reconciliation with no extrinsic support to lean on outside of that relationship (qtd. in Shaw 126). Thus, communal healing becomes an integral part of Beyoncé’s personal healing process and, when considering *Lemonade*’s philosophy as a historical process, national healing process, as well.

One additional extrinsic factor that impels Beyoncé’s healing process throughout *Lemonade* is the ancestral figure, which Morrison describes as “timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (qtd. in Coloma Peñate 113). In *Lemonade*, this ancestral figure is Hattie, the grandmother of Beyoncé’s husband, who offers the pathway to healing in the testimonial, “I had my ups and downs, but I always find the inner strength to pull myself up. I was served lemons, but I made lemonade” (Coloma Peñate 113). This admonition to find meaning in suffering becomes *Lemonade*’s ethos, as it is through this statement that Beyoncé is able to find the tools for reconciliation from the wreckage of her husband’s infidelity and the disloyalty of her

ancestors before her. Hattie's philosophy on healing comes in the form of a recipe, which Beyoncé applies to her own life:

Take one pint of water, add a half pound of sugar, the juice of eight lemons, the zest of half lemon. Pour the water into one, then to another several times. Strain through a clean napkin. Grandmother. The alchemist. You spun gold out of this hard life. Conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter, who then passed them down to her daughter (Knowles-Carter).

Hattie's philosophy, as paraphrased by Beyoncé here, emphasizes building meaning out of adverse circumstances as the means of breaking the "curse" of broken relationships embedded in Beyoncé's ancestral lineage, and she learns this method as it applies to her own relationship and the tools she needs to rebuild her family. In order to break this cycle, not only does Beyoncé learn from the women before her, but she transmits this lesson to her own daughter, envisioning her children as the future of this more just future she has sought to create throughout *Lemonade* (Coloma Peñate 120). In this way, Beyoncé both learns from the ancestral figure that informs her personal healing process but slowly becomes the ancestral figure for later generations, allowing this advice for reconciliation to live on far past its inception with Hattie or, potentially, the women before her (Coloma Peñate 120). In turn, Beyoncé sees children — and specifically, her own children — as the key to the more just future she wants to create: like her father did with her, Beyoncé wants to be the guiding figure who instructs her children in the ways of healing and creating healthy relationships in order to ensure that the "curse" stays broken for generations to come. Only then can she make meaning in her suffering, or lemonade from her lemons.

## V. Conclusion: “We Need Some Kind of Tomorrow”

When Paul D tells Sethe that “we need some kind of tomorrow” at the end of *Beloved*, he asserts a sentiment that is at the core of both Morrison’s novel and Beyoncé’s visual album: despite the pains of the past, one must work to build a greater future. For Beyoncé, this work consists of regular self-reflection and historical retrospection through communal healing, seeking strength in the comfort of others as you confront your trauma directly. But for Morrison, creating a more just future is a matter of survival: Sethe must continue living each day in order to move past the trauma she has endured and guilt she has taken on. While she, like Beyoncé, confronts her trauma through the figure of Beloved, she ultimately grows weary and tortured as a result of this long-term confrontation, and once Beloved leaves, Sethe is left in shambles, unsure of where to move forward. The tool she had relied on for her healing was always ephemeral, and despite Paul D’s promises to build this future with Sethe — he says “we need some kind of tomorrow,” not “you need some kind of tomorrow” — there is no guarantee that Paul D will remain a permanent part of Sethe’s life. The community of women that exorcize Beloved from 124 are not like the chorus of women that guide Beyoncé through her healing process in *Lemonade*: they, like Beloved and like Paul D eventually, abandon Sethe after the exorcism, leaving her alone and struggling to find a way to move forward. By the time Paul D arrives, Sethe is ready to die: the “hard work of beating back the past” has left her physically and mentally exhausted.

This signals one of the most significant differences between *Beloved* and *Lemonade*’s approaches to healing: while Beyoncé offers a concrete approach to healing through a radical engagement with the past, Morrison’s conclusions are much less definitive and more difficult to pin down. Beyoncé offers her reader a clear guideline for healing in the form of Hattie’s lemonade recipe, and she actualizes this throughout *Lemonade* in ways that the reader can clearly

observe and learn from. To Beyoncé, healing comes from confronting one's personal and national histories, learning how the legacies of systemic racism create long-standing "curses" within one's lineage, and disrupting the patterns of personal and national history in the present to create a model for future generations to follow. But Morrison offers no such conclusion. In fact, the end of *Beloved* is more inconclusive than it is definitive. The end of Sethe's story suggests that she has the key to healing by abandoning the past and seeking a new future with Paul D, but this conclusion feels disingenuous to the philosophical project Morrison has created by having *Beloved* force Sethe to confront her past in ways that indisputably help her heal in the present. Conversely, one could surmise that Morrison is then arguing that one must extensively confront the past through the sort of reflection that Sethe undergoes with *Beloved*, but this ignores the deep psychological and physical torture *Beloved* inflicts upon Sethe as a result of her commitment to righting past wrongs — a regular, long-term sort of torture that so engrosses Sethe in the past that she is even incapable of living fully in the present. Even the novel's final chapter seems inconclusive in its admonition to the reader, pivoting between asserting that this is and is not a story to pass on. The reader is forced to ask: is Sethe's example one to follow, or one to avoid and learn from? Does Sethe fully heal at the end of *Beloved*? Does she go on to create a healthier future, one less possessed by the past, after the novel's events end? Morrison deliberately refuses to answer such questions, letting the reader decide for themselves what lessons to take away from the story she tells in *Beloved*, but this does not mean that *Beloved* is any less significant as a historical project. Rather, it puts the burden on the reader and their individual circumstances: few people will endure situations as profoundly devastating as Sethe's (and, by extension, Margaret Garner's), and providing a one-size-fits-all approach to healing, at either the personal or national level, would be dismissive of the multiplicity of traumatic

experiences that readers bring with them when reading the novel. By leaving *Beloved* on this ambiguous note, rather than asserting a clear-cut philosophical approach like Beyoncé offers and demonstrates in *Lemonade*, Morrison suggests that the process of balancing competing attentions to the past and future is a complex matter that requires individual solutions based on the experience. Nonetheless, there is no question that Morrison believes engaging with the past critically and reflectively is an essential part of the healing process, but that becoming possessed by this past will inhibit one's ability to move into the future with a healthier mindset.

In considering both *Beloved* and *Lemonade* as allegories for national methods of healing, we should conclude by connecting these different healing processes to the long-standing influence of systemic racism in American society today, a feature that is inextricably tied to each author's approach to healing in their respective works. There is no question that both Morrison and Beyoncé would agree with the belief that an extensive reexamination of past injustices and their legacies is an essential part of understanding systemic racism in America today: after all, *Lemonade* and *Beloved* are historical projects designed for exactly this purpose. Both women understand that contemporary systems, specifically the family system, are haunted by the legacy of slavery's effect on previous generations, and they recognize that correcting these systems in the present and future requires understanding how slavery disrupted them more than a century ago, creating a "lineage of broken male-female relationships," as Beyoncé puts it, that continue until today ("Beyoncé In Her Own Words"). This same approach could be applied to the multitude of other systems which slavery's influence has irreversibly impacted — Beyoncé examines one of those institutions, the criminal justice system, with her references to police violence against Black people, connecting this back to the family system with the images of Black mothers holding photos of their sons who were murdered by police (Knowles-Carter).

Similarly, Morrison explores how slavery impacted gender roles during the nineteenth century through the figures of Sethe and Paul D, connecting this to questions of gender equality more than a century later. It is only through this reexamination of the past that Morrison and Beyoncé are able to fully comprehend the racial inequalities of their present in order to fight back against them, and it offers a model for Americans today to follow in an era of increasing systemic and cultural racism. Neoliberal and conservative perspectives often downplay the relevance of discussions about past injustices when considering present-day problems — like the oft-cited remark that slavery ended over a century ago and that no living individual today has participated in or been victim of that institution — but *Beloved* and *Lemonade* counter this argument through its portrayal of characters like Sethe and Beyoncé, who are consumed by their past, so much so that they cannot build a future without confront the past that controls their present. Through narrativizing her critique of such viewpoints, Morrison and Beyoncé are able to demonstrate how, across time, “the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive” — the past is “desperate to stay alive,” and until we confront it as such, it will continue haunting our present and inhibiting any vision of a just and positive future (Morrison xix).

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