The Scarred and Fragmented: Bodies in *Beloved*

The canon of American literary works includes within its fabricated “body” a plethora of scarred and branded characters. Among the many, characters such as Uncas and Queequeg have their bodies written upon to declare allegiance to their respective tribes within their separate narratives, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Moby Dick*: Uncas has the tell-tale, revelatory tattoo of the totemic tortoise confirming his association with the Delawares; Queequeg has the “counterpane” pattern of various squares and triangles tattooed throughout his body as physical representations of his West Indian heritage and status. Seen from the vantage point of a white American male, though, the markings bear a connotation of savagery on both characters. Hester Prynne, though not physically marked with scarring or tattoos, is notoriously branded with the letter “A” which—as the reader discovers when reading through *The Scarlet Letter*—shifts from an ostracized signifier of scorn to the diametric opposite: agency. Captain Ahab, also of *Moby Dick*, has his scarring in the shape of “a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts into it and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded” (109). Though all of these physical markings vary in context, their bodily and societal significance represents a common denominator tying them collectively to American history. In addition, there is an underlying commonality which threads within the most common surviving binarism in American culture today: self vs. other.

The arboreal imagery of the scar will surface again when Sethe, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, is discussed in further detail. Sethe’s “chokecherry tree” scar—once implanted into
the narrative—engenders a rooted life of its own as a recurrent motif in the novel. In addition, it serves a somewhat paradoxical function of being a dead, healed over signifier—permanently inscribed on Sethe’s back—which also lends transportive access to the seemingly living “rememory” of her time at “Sweet Home.” There is a skeptical, disillusioned attitude towards time by Denver, Paul D., and more so by Sethe. This fragmenting of time into discrete entities of “past,” “present,” and “future,” is yet another implication of the splitting of Sethe’s sense of self from her recounted experiences at Sweet Home and “124”. Concomitant to the prevalent scar imagery—inscribed onto Sethe’s mother, Sethe, as well as embodied (in a manner of speaking) by Beloved the character—with the fracturing of time, the rhetoric of fragmentation is seen throughout Beloved. Baby Suggs being “broke down” as well as “sixty years” of a life “chewed up...and spit...out like a fish bone;” Sethe’s “divided back” and collecting “every bit of life [Sethe] had made, all the parts of her that [are] precious and fine and beautiful...[my italics]” are just a few examples of many illustrating just how pervasive the shattering of one’s mind, body and self are due to slavery.

Morrison’s novel follows suit and contributes to an already rich and nuanced tapestry of American stories dealing with the body. In Beloved, Morrison both sharpens and distorts the arbitrarily accepted lines of discrimination (if such a thing exists) behind the various conceptual representations of the body—historical, corporeal, and postmodern. This is probably as close as the novel gets to sharing any similarities within the broader scope of American letters before it takes a drastic detour into territory all its own. The recurrence of the scarred body within the novel—for the purpose of this paper, I am dealing specifically with the maternal figures of Sethe’s shadow of a mother and Sethe herself—strips them of their foundational humanity and maternal identities, leaving a fragmented sense of self
instead. In an effort to counter the forces of slavery responsible for this shattered sense of self, Baby Suggs attempts to preach an antithetical sermon in the hopes of reincorporating the fragmented shards back into an assemblage of loved parts.

Sethe’s mother has a very sad existence in the novel. Clearly, Morrison is including the mother as part of the “Sixty Million and more” in her dedication prior to the beginning of the novel. A staggering figure to consider but also nearly impossible to account for, this estimate of sixty million gives rise to the mothers, fathers, daughters, brothers and other combinations of those whose agency, selfhood, and familial ties are stripped and/or stolen. To illustrate the relational basis between Sethe’s mother and herself, Barbara Schapiro explains in her critical essay: “the mother, the child’s first vital other, is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition” (194). This is true for Sethe and her mother as Sethe can only recall a handful of instances in which they meet. On one such instance, Sethe’s mother “opened up her dress and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, “This is your ma’am. This” (72). All that Sethe’s mother amounts to is a mark seared into her skin to implicate her as a mere object of property. The lack of details given to the mother’s hanging leaves the impression of it being done on a whim. Even then, the part of Sethe’s mother that is supposed to distinguish her from all others—her scar—is hardly distinguishable for Sethe when she sees her mother’s lifeless body.

Another dehumanizing device used on Sethe’s mother is the horse’s bit. Sethe makes the following observation of her rememory of her mother: “You know what? She’d had that bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (240). Here, Morrison is employing ironic mode by forcing an opposite
facial expression to Sethe’s mother while enduring a torturous bit. Again, Schapiro provides the following commentary: “the sense of deep, searing injury to one’s humanity that these descriptions evoke is perhaps compounded by unconscious resonances of violation at the earliest oral roots of our human identity” (200).

As Sethe is a product of her upbringing, she is already at a disadvantage by not experiencing a relationship with her mother thereby not acquiring a sense of self (opposed to her daughter, Denver’s self-realized sense of self near the end of the novel). Schapiro explains this consequence of the slave system and how it “choked off the vital circulation between mother and child so crucial to the development of the self” (199-200). Since Sethe was deprived of that relational connection with her own mother, she becomes engrossed with her own self-identity metonymically by her milk. However, Sethe’s fragmentation of self is shown when she stumbles upon Schoolteacher’s lesson in separating her into human and animal characteristics based on the prevalent white/male perspective. Casually, Schoolteacher tells his pupil “no, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228). Never mind the absurd distinction of separating the animalistic from the humanistic. The more egregious affront is the attention paid to lining up those characteristics.

Another example of Sethe’s separation of self is the beating which results in her back scarring in the shape of a “chokecherry tree.” Sethe’s eventual rememory of the beating which results in the deadened tissue of the scar itself deems it unnecessary for her to see it for herself. It is when Amy Denver “reads” Sethe’s scar as a metaphorized image of a tree that one discovers its significance: “It’s a tree, Lu [Sethe]. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk—it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty log of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these
blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom.”” (93) The real brutality lies behind the dehumanizing mentality of Schoolteacher when he exclaims, “but now [Sethe’s] gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'[s] overbeat her and made her cut and run...telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if he beat it beyond the point of education” (176). Again, Sethe is disregarded as a human being and is viewed as an animal. It is no wonder Sethe makes every effort to “beat back the past” and “keep the past at bay” (51, 86). Alison Easton explains in her critical essay that “Sethe does not write her own body; she is written upon. In her world the pen is indeed in male hands...the ‘schoolmaster’ slaver noting down his racist researches about his slaves’ physical characteristics” (55-56). In addition, Jean Wyatt provides the following insight in her critical essay: “Sethe’s problematic relation...results from her position as a body not only in a maternal order but also in a social order that systematically denied her subject position to those it defined as objects of exchange” (478).

Baby Suggs is another character—though not scarred or branded—who bears the physical impairment weighed down by the white inscription of slavery on her hips; or, in her words, “slave life...”busted [my] legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue...”” (102). Worn down by age and not given the natural relationship with her children, Baby Suggs compares her inconsequential, fragmented world in the hands of whites as checkers: “men and women were moved around like checkers...what she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (27, 28). This sentiment is echoed when one gains a glimpse of the core of Baby Suggs’ fragmented self caused by the ramifications of slavery as an institution: “And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her
children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (165).

Prior to her surrender, Baby Suggs confronts the view held by whites of the slave system during her pivotal sermon in the Clearing. It is in this literal and figurative space of openness where Baby Suggs declares: “‘Here...in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard’” (103). Rather than a broad description of a slave’s body as a coherent whole, Baby Suggs continues down a list of the brutalized body parts countering the internalized brokenness and hatred—created by the “definers” of slavery—with love: the initial pronouncement to love one’s “flesh” moves to one’s “eyes,” “back,” “hands,” “mouth,” “neck,” “inside parts,” and ends her sermon with the fragmented parts needing to be addressed—loved, healed, reassembled—because “this [body] is the prize” (104). Cynthia Dobbs deals extensively with examining Baby Suggs’ sermon in her critical essay. Dobbs goes on to explain “the sermon breaks [flesh] down into individual parts—each despised by white slave culture, each in need of claiming by these former slaves. This reclamation is a necessary answer to the horrors of slavery” (566).

However, her aspirations of love are no match against the mentality behind an institutionalized system which views Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Sethe’s mother as nothing more than animal-like property. Baby Suggs’ efforts are her way of enacting the workings of reverse discourse—in this case, against the minoritizing “peculiar institution” of slavery.

Similar to Nathaniel Hawthorne confronting the ghosts of his familial past and accepting responsibility for his ancestors’ involvement in the Salem witch trials which he addresses in his “Custom House” prologue in *The Scarlet Letter*, Morrison deliberately snatches her reader into a fictional world to experience the oppressive world of slavery and its residual aftermath through the eyes of the oppressed, not the oppressors. In her own
words, Morrison states in her prologue: “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (XVIII). This kidnapping from familiar ground in the very beginning mimics the unsettling world of those scarred in the novel, and it forces the reader to go on the journey of characters’ past to understand how their sense of self was ripped out. The recurrence of the scarred body has a three-fold purpose: it provides a narrative and physical reference to history for the seemingly free yet enslaved characters, on the micro-level; it fuses the elements of history and fiction into a mixture of historical fiction which presents the unacknowledged historical facts of the violating slave system—with a touch of the fantastic—to society, on the macro-level; and finally, it explores the abstract concepts of postmodernism; especially, the concept of fragmentation—one of many characteristics attributed to the postmodern movement.
Outline for Beloved Paper

I. Intro: Historical examples of American literature’s scarred/branded bodies:
   A. Tribal association
      1. Uncas – tortoise tattoo and allegiance to Delaware tribe
      2. Queequeg – markings are exoticized markings of West Indies heritage/status
   B. Branding
      1. Hester Prynne and her scarlet letter
      2. Ahab and his “branded” tree
   C. Thesis: Scarred Bodies of Beloved
      1. Sethe’s mom is nameless despite to reduced marking under her breast
      2. Sethe
      3. Baby Suggs

II. Body: Evidence of fragmentations
   A. Sethe’s mom scar & its signification – circle & cross used for identification purposes
      Ineffectiveness of scarring - “One thing she did do. ‘This is your ma’am. This’” (72).
      2. Bit
         a. Bit for Sethe’s mother – refer to page 200 in Schapiro’s essay
         b. “You know what? She’d had that bit so many times she smiled...I never saw her own smile” (240).
   B. Sethe
      1. Human vs. animal “No, no. And don’t forget to line them up” (228).
      2. Chokecherry Tree - “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (51). Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (86).
   C. Baby Suggs’ attempts to counter fragment
      1. Sermon
      2. “…in all of Baby’s life...men and women were moved around like checkers”(27, 28).

III. Conclusion: personal anecdote

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