

THE REPRESENTATION OF RITUALS IN TONI MORRISON'S
BELOVED: COMMUNITY, RESISTANCE, EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of rituals in African-American communities as represented in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), which provide stabilization, harmony, communal bonding and individual empowerment. As such, Morrison privileges what anthropologists call a socio-functionalist view of rituals, namely, the notion that they are connected to social practices and group harmony rather than to transcendental appeals. Morrison's view of rituals is explored in three key moments: the community feast prior to Sethe's killing of the "crawling-already" baby; Baby Suggs's worship services in the Clearing; the exorcism of the ghost of *Beloved*. Definitions and insights on the social function of rituals are drawn from anthropologists Émile Durkheim, Victor Turner, and Max Gluckman; from religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, and from mythologist Joseph Campbell.

Keywords: Morrison. Rituals. Religion. History. Redemption.

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A REPRESENTAÇÃO DE RITUAIS EM *AMADA* DE TONI MORRISON: COMUNIDADE, RESISTÊNCIA, EMPODERAMENTO

RESUMO: Este artigo examina a função dos rituais em comunidades afro-americanas, como representadas no romance *Beloved* (1987), de Toni Morrison, que proveem estabilidade, harmonia, fortalecimento de laços comunitários e empoderamento de grupos e indivíduos. Desse modo, Morrison privilegia o que os antropólogos denominam visão sócio-funcionalista dos rituais, isto é, a noção de que estão ligados de preferência a práticas sociais e harmonia coletiva do que a apelos transcendentais. A visão de Morrison sobre rituais é explorada em três momentos-chave: o banquete comunitário que antecede o assassinato do bebê “que já engatinhava”; os cultos de Baby Suggs na Clareira; o exorcismo do fantasma de Amada. Como suporte teórico utilizam-se reflexões dos antropólogos Émile Durkheim, Victor Turner e Max Gluckman; da especialista em estudos da religião, Catherine Bell, e do mitologista Joseph Campbell.

Palavras-chave: Morrison. Rituais. Religião. História. Redenção.

INTRODUCTION

Readers and critics have long acknowledged the strategic use of black rituals in African American literature. They have pointed out, especially, the way writers present them as resources to bring communities together, foster solidarity, and most of all, to give black subjects a sense of communal identity. The Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, for example, in *Not Without Laughter* (1930), portrays the role blues and Afro-American Christian rituals play as a means to deal with oppression and racial disenfranchisement in black communities. Here, rituals constitute “survival mechanisms,” namely, “tools for surmounting oppression, for building community, for attaining psychic wholeness” (THOMAS, 1988, p. 123). Likewise, in *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison makes extensive use of rituals to foreground issues of civil liberty, visibility, and social exclusion in mid-20th century United States. Ellison comments, for instance, on his use of ritual in the much-commented “Battle Royal” passage in the novel: “It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck....I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society so that all I had to do was present them in a broader context of meaning” (1995, p. 12). Along the same

lines, James Baldwin, in his semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountains* (1953), draws extensively from the rituals of the black church, materialized in the form of sermons, exhortations, black spirituals, and prayer to interrogate biblical, and socio-cultural notions of evil, salvation, sacrifice, and, of course, whiteness and blackness. In later novels, Baldwin intensifies his use of black spirituals, especially, “to strengthen the determination to fight injustice, just as in an earlier era those same spirituals had helped blacks to surmount justice” (THOMAS, 1988, p. 151). Of course, the use of black folklore and rituals as textual strategies has had its share of opponents. Earlier in the twentieth century, the novelist Charles W. Chesnutt faced resistance when he published a collection of short stories based on plantation folklore and its rituals – *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Most critics argued that his fiction did more harm than good for promoting racism and perpetuating long-held stereotypes about black culture and religion (MINNICK, 2010, p. 189). Along the same lines, Richard Wright, the acclaimed author of *Native Son* (1940), voiced his dissatisfaction with writers’ use of black myths and rituals as well, privileging a more political engagement with the black past and present. He showed no consideration towards religious, “mystical visions of life that freeze millions in static degradation, no matter how emotionally satisfying such degradation seem[ed] to those who wallow[ed] in it” (1957, p. 48-49).

Toni Morrison’s fiction has extensively drawn from this tradition in which rituals appear as significant sources of personal and communal empowerment. As she sets her plots either in the distant past or in the twenty-first-century, Morrison brings into her fictional texts the rich repertoire of black folk wisdom, stories, and religious beliefs, materialized in various forms of rituals. Although rituals, in one way or another, are present throughout her literary production, it is *Beloved* (1987) which best illustrates how Morrison uses them to convey the richness of black America’s heritage and experience. In *Beloved*, Morrison goes beyond the depiction of rituals as sources of psychological healing, as scholarship has normally pointed out. I contend that this novel promotes a socio-functionalist view of rituals as well. Drawing from the biblical tradition, African religions, and folk beliefs, *Beloved* displays a multi-faceted, rich representation of the power of rituals as instruments to stabilize communities in times of social disturbance, and to promote communal bonding in times of social disintegration.

RITUALS: SOURCES OF BONDING, RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT

Among *Beloved*’s main themes are the consequences of physical and psychological trauma on the lives of black men, women, and children. In this

novel, the focus is Sethe, a fugitive slave who would rather kill her children rather than see them go back to slavery. Having lived most of her life in Kentucky in a place called Sweet Home, Sethe runs away after the death of her “benevolent” master. When the new master, Schoolteacher, takes over the management of the plantation, his cruelty leads to several escape attempts, most of them unsuccessful. Eventually, Sethe manages to flee and cross the river to join her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, a freed slave, in Cincinnati, Ohio, a free state. During her journey she faces hunger, sickness due to her pregnancy, and the constant fear of being caught. When she thinks she is finally safe at Baby Suggs’ house, referred to in the novel by the number 124, she finds out her owner has come to take her and her children back. When she sees them approaching the house, she grabs her children and runs to a woodshed at the back. Before they get to them, she slices the throat of one of her children – Beloved – with a saw. She would have killed the other children too had not she been stopped by her mother-in-law and Stamp Paid, a friend of the family. She is considered crazy, arrested, and taken to jail. After being released from prison, Sethe, her daughter Denver, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs have to deal with the ghost of Beloved who haunts the house, scaring neighbors and Sethe’s grown children who would rather leave than live with a ghost. Eventually, a girl named Beloved moves into the house and Sethe believes she is her daughter who has come back from the dead to help alleviate her pain and guilt. But what appears to be a blessing ends up as a curse, as Beloved gradually starts to drain Sethe’s strength, as if in revenge for what Sethe had done. Only when Denver and the community step in is the house finally exorcized of the ghost’s influence.

Critics in general agree that *Beloved* constitutes Morrison’s attempt at providing an alternative version of American history, this time from the perspective of the oppressed. The novel is actually based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave from Kentucky who escaped to Ohio in 1856 and also killed her children. In *Beloved*, Morrison weaves Christian motifs and supernatural elements with descriptions of slavery, sexual abuse, physical bondage, and psychological terror. In the process, Morrison stages the various strategies blacks have devised to handle the horrors of captivity, thereby making the novel a performative “ritual of healing” for both characters and readers (KRUMHOLZ, 1999, p. 110). Yet, if on the one hand rituals serve as agents for spiritual healing, on the other, they fulfill important sociological functions as well. In *Beloved*, Morrison explores this dimension in three key moments in the novel: a) the banquet at Baby Suggs’s house, right before Sethe’s slave owners show up to claim her and the children; b) the spiritual services held at the Clearing, a place in the forest where Baby Suggs gathers the black community and preaches the Word; and, c) the final exorcizing ritual

of the ghost – now materialized in the girl Beloved – that had been consuming Sethe for so long.

Although the novel's main focus is Beloved and her role in Sethe's process of psychological healing, much of the narrative is also devoted to Suggs and her position as a community leader. Since her arrival in Cincinnati, Ohio, as a freed slave, Baby Suggs turned her house into a safe haven, opening her doors to passers-by, the homeless and the needy. Food and shelter were made available to all who came by, as in her house "not one but two pots simmered on the stove; ...the lamp burned all night long" (2004, p. 102). Since slavery had taken away pretty much everything except her heart, she reasoned she might as well use what was left to help those around her. She became an icon in the community, "giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking ... loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone" (2004, p. 161). Since her arrival, eating, singing, and dancing turned into rituals of friendship, communal bonding, and emotional support. People felt so welcome that they even used her address to leave messages for relatives and acquaintances, knowing that they would eventually stop by.

Yet, the major event dramatizing the social dimension of rituals takes place right before the arrival of Sethe's former owner, Schoolteacher, who has come to take Sethe back to Kentucky. The novel mentions that twenty-days after Sethe's arrival, Stamp Paid, the man who ferried her across the river, comes over with two buckets full of blackberries, "tasting so good and happy that to eat them was like being in church" (2004, p. 160). Because he had gone to all sorts of troubles to pick them up in a place by the river infested with all kinds of dangerous insects and snakes, Baby Suggs decides to make pastry dough, bake some pies, and invite a couple of neighbors. Then, Sethe decides to kill a couple of chickens and Stamp Paid brings some fish. This is the beginning of a major feast that goes well into the night. The food multiplied: "Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati – over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch – became a wagon load of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug" (2004, p. 161). The event ends up with ninety people from all over the neighborhood.

Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* argues that the main function of rituals is "to strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member" (2008, p. 226); for Durkheim, even in sacred rituals held in temples and shrines, the ultimate purpose is social rather than spiritual, as rituals serve to maintain the group together in times of adversity and social chaos. Rituals in this case constitute the

expression of social unity and cohesion. In *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell adds that besides creating communal bonds, rituals order chaos and provide people with a coherent picture of the universe as well (1972, p. 114-115).

These conceptions help to shed light on the significance of Baby Suggs's feast. Given that most of the community members had been enslaved, beaten, starved or chased away from various places, Baby Suggs's banquet provides them with the opportunity to feel loved, fellowshiped, and, more importantly, to experience order and coherence in a world that has painted them as inferior, unintelligent, immoral, lazy, and often dangerous. A look at the background of the main characters shows why such a gathering is therapeutic for the community. Back in Kentucky, Sethe had been whipped so savagely that the scars on her back formed the shape of a tree. She was sexually molested by her master's young nephew; Schoolteacher had measured her body and classified her as inferior because of the size of her head, nose, teeth and buttocks (2004, p. 226). During her escape, she had had to leave her husband behind, never hearing from him again; on the run, she had given birth to the baby she later named Denver.

Baby Suggs's background is no different. Her freedom came at the expense of her son's bondage, as he made a deal with his owner, Mr. Gardner, to pay for his mother's manumission with extra labor. The novel highlights the fact that slavery had affected everyone, runaways and free blacks alike: "Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe" (2004, p. 235). These were the people who sought Baby Suggs's protection. Catherine Bell remarks that, from a social perspective, rituals help to stabilize, regulate, adjust, and, more importantly, preserve the ethos of communities in times of disturbances (1997, p. 29). Baby Suggs's feast is more than typical meal sharing and communal gathering; it functions as a ritual of stabilization and social reconnection in times of cultural and social fragmentation.

Yet, despite the celebratory and bonding atmosphere of Baby Suggs's feast, there is a puzzling turn of events as the narrative develops. After the bounty of the night before, all the laughing and enjoyment are replaced by expressions of rancor and envy: "Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy?" (2004, p. 161). The feeling of resentment only increases as they remember the abundance they had witnessed at Baby Suggs's. In fact, "[it] made them furious" to see so much food multiplied on their neighbor's table when most of them could barely make ends meet (2004, p. 162). Baby Suggs, a keen observer of people's behavior, wakes up the next day feeling something different in the air. It does not take her long to realize that she had gone too far, "she had overstepped, given too much, offended by excess" (2004, p. 163). Baby Suggs does not know it yet, but the consequences of this overstepping,

this show of excess, will bring serious harm to her family and to the community. Stamp paid remembers being at Suggs's house and noticing how restless she was, always looking towards the river as if something ominous were about to happen. It did, but it came from the road, instead. The novel describes the arrival of Sethe's owner, Schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher and the sheriff, as the apocalyptic appearance of "the four horseman" (2004, p. 174). What puzzles Baby Suggs, though, is not so much to see the dreadful group heading toward her house, but why no one came by to warn her of the imminent danger. The ensuing events are Sethe's tragic murder of her infant baby, her imprisonment, and the fragmentation of a family and of a community.

On discussing the therapeutic aspects of rituals, Max Gluckman argues that it is naïve to see ritualistic activities as expressions of harmony and unity only, as Durkheim posited. For Gluckman, ritual is effective not so much because it provides an opportunity for groups to bond, although it does that as well, but "because it exhibits all the tensions and strife inherent in social life itself" (1965, p. 265). In other words, rituals are mechanisms whereby groups act out their conflicts, mostly in exaggerated ways, so as to prevent further social deterioration. In the end, unity is affirmed and social equilibrium attained, but not before the group goes through the cathartic, therapeutic process of certain social rituals. Echoing Gluckman, Victor Turner adds that in the process of dramatizing and giving form to the group's conflicts, rituals provide a unique opportunity for regeneration and social renewal (1977, p. 97). Here, conflict gives room to social cohesion and relief, but not before the participants exorcise their personal and communal demons.

These views are useful to explain the paradoxical behavior of the black community the day after Baby Suggs's gathering. Even though Baby Suggs had always been supportive of the community, many still believed fate or God had unduly favored her. A question they had always posed was: "why is she and her always the center of things?" (2004, p. 161). Unaware of her sufferings at Sweet Home in Kentucky, they believed she had not experienced the same hardships most of them had been through, like working with a baby on the back or being whipped by a young white boy. What seemed to bother them the most, though, was the fact that she had not even escaped slavery; she had been lucky enough to have a son who bought her out and, worse still, she had been "driven to the Ohio River in a wagon...by the very man who had been her master," who later "paid her resettlement fee" and set her up in a house with two floors and a well (p. 2004, 162). After moving to 124, Sethe and her children inherited the same material blessings of abundance and freedom her mother-in-law possessed. This material comfort bestowed all on a single family gave them the impression that God had been somehow unfair in his judgment.

It is this love-hate feeling that remains after the people disperse and go home. Thus, if on the one hand, Baby Suggs's feast promotes bonding and fellowship, on the other, it exposes the community's scarcity of means, their lack of material resources and power. No wonder the next day they all "swallowed baking soda...to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124" (2004, p. 163). As a ritual, then, Baby Suggs's gathering allows the community to release their anger, thereby providing the much-needed catharsis of their pains and sufferings. The benefits of this ritual scapegoating will only be felt in the end when the community gets together to expel Beloved, the demon-ghost that has been haunting Sethe's family.

Morrison's allusion to the Bible in the representation of Baby Suggs's feast further accentuates its ritualistic attributes. Her feast echoes two important events recorded in the New Testament: the multiplication of loaves and fish, and the Last Supper. The synoptic gospels refer to an occasion in which Jesus, who usually drew large multitudes of people, fed over five thousand with just five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14:13-21). The multitude had been following him all day in search of both physical and spiritual relief. The gospel of Mark, more specifically, mentions Jesus's compassion for the people, whom he saw as sheep without a shepherd. When the disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the crowd so the people can find food and shelter, Jesus tells them they should provide the food. When they tell him they only have five loaves of bread and two fish, the miracle happens. Jesus picks up the bread and the fish, blesses them, and then asks the disciples to distribute them to the multitude. To the disciples' astonishment, the food is sufficient, with leftovers enough to fill up twelve baskets. If the multiplication episode promotes bonding among Jesus's followers, the Last Supper exposes the internal conflicts faced by Jesus's community of disciples (Matthew 26:17). One source of tension, as the gospels record it, has to do with Jesus's role as a spiritual and political leader. Is he the one who will finally rid them of the claws of the Roman Empire and establish the Kingdom of Israel once and for all? Or is he just a spiritual leader or even a charlatan, perhaps? Jesus is aware of this tension when he announces that someone amidst them is a traitor ready to turn him over to the enemy. Yet, Jesus is more concerned with spiritual matters during the Passover celebration. He confirms his mission as Israel's much-anticipated Messiah; he announces his imminent death and uses the bread and the wine as symbols of his atonement for the sins of the world.

As a ritual, Baby Suggs's feast is suggestive, in many ways, of the events recorded in the gospels. The novel stresses, for example, Baby Suggs's role as a spiritual leader in the community. The novel mentions that "[a]ccepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became

an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (2004, p. 102). The adjective “unchurched” is significant, as it suggests no connection to traditional organized religion, very much like Jesus, who claimed no earthly titles and challenged the Judaic establishments of his time. Both Jesus and Baby Suggs faced rejection, yet kept their hearts open to those who sought them. Therefore, the multiplication of food at Baby Suggs’s house, echoing the biblical story where Jesus feeds the multitude, becomes a ritual of reconciliation in that it allows the community to experience relief in times of distress, and equilibrium in times of social and spiritual disintegration; similarly to the Last Supper, it is also a ritual of catharsis as it allows the community to externalize and act upon their anger, thereby helping them purge their deepest pains and resentments. If in the biblical narrative Jesus becomes the scapegoat for the community’s sins, in *Beloved*, it is Baby Suggs and Sethe who become the community’s scapegoats, as the community casts upon them their internalized hate and pain.

Besides the feast, another example of Morrison’s exploration of the sociological dimensions of rituals is Baby Suggs’s services held in an isolated place in the nearby forest. The novel shows that while in winter she visits the churches in the community, in summer she gathers believers in a place in the middle of the forest called the Clearing. Despite the informality of the gathering, its ritual-like aspects surface in the way the meeting is conducted. Before the ceremony officially starts, Baby Suggs places herself “on a huge flat-sided rock” (2004, p. 102) and starts to pray in silence while the participants wait on the outside among the trees. This moment of introspection sets the tone for what is about to come. When she is ready (they know it when she puts her stick down), she urges everyone to come forward. She calls the children first and orders them to laugh; she calls the grown men next and orders them to dance; the women come next, but she asks them to cry instead. Order is then disrupted and the women stop crying and start dancing, while the men cry and the children dance. They either cry or dance or laugh until “exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath” (2004, p. 103). After this communal outpouring of emotions, Baby Suggs begins to preach. But it is not the usual hellfire and brimstone type of sermon urging the congregation to repent and abandon sin lest they end up in a lake of fire. Her message is centered on their bodies and how they should love each and every part of it: flesh, skin, hands, face, mouth, backs, shoulders, necks, arms – including their inner parts too – lung, womb, private parts, and heart. She emphasizes that they should love their body because no one else does. After this improvised sermon about self-love, Baby Suggs stands up and dances to the sound of music sung in four-part

harmony. Sethe remembers that under Baby Suggs's charge, "the people let go", they held no emotions back (2004, p. 111).

Much like the feast ritual, Baby Suggs's gathering at the Clearing fulfills various social functions in the community. Gluckman's insights on the socio-psychological functions of rituals can be useful to understand the rather unusual nature of Baby Suggs's services. He uses the term "rituals of rebellion" to refer to rituals in which the natural order is momentarily disrupted and hierarchies are both mocked and called into question (1963, p.134-35). During festivities such as Carnival, for instance, it is right for men and women to exchange roles and parade in the streets for everyone's enjoyment. It is also fine to mock at figures of power. Gluckman suggests that in these cases rituals act out social inequalities as well as provide outlets for releasing held-up tensions. Social balance is restored, albeit temporarily, when the anxieties these unequal positions generate are ritualistically performed in a controlled environment. From this perspective, Baby Suggs's call in the Clearing can be interpreted as a ritual of catharsis as well as a ritual of rebellion. As a ritual of purification, their laughing, crying, and dancing allow them to act out their anger as well as their joys, in an environment free of judgment. They are invited to free themselves from all the hate and contempt they have been taught to feel against themselves: "Here...in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (2004, p. 103). As she invites them to love their desecrated body parts, from head to toe, she prepares them for the message of self-love she is going to deliver later on, symbolized in the story as "her great big heart" (2004, p. 103). As a ritual of rebellion, their laughing and dancing stand for resistance as well as disruption of the master-slave order in which they have been inserted; here, ritualistically, they dance and laugh at their oppressors despite the pains they have been inflicted: "And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck, put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up" (2004, p. 104). Like a biblical prophet, she invites them to stand up against the false image of inferiority they have been fed throughout their lives. Since "white people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle...swinging screaming baboons, [and] sleeping snakes" (2004, p. 234), by dancing and laughing they challenged these images of barbarism and savagery.

Similar to Baby Suggs' feast, biblical parallels once again highlight the ritualistic aspects of Baby Suggs's service in the Clearing. One parallel is the Sermon of the Mount as registered in the gospel of Matthew (5:3-11) and the Sermon of the Plain in Luke (6:20-26), commonly known as the Beatitudes. Here, gospel writers depict Jesus instructing his followers on the spiritual rewards of leading a virtuous life: blessed are the poor in spirit because they

will inherit the kingdom of heaven; the meek because they will inherit the earth; those who mourn because they will be comforted; the peacemakers will be called children of God, and the pure in heart will see God. Jesus also talks about the persecuted and rejected for religious or political reasons. Amy B. Hardison in “The Sociocultural Context of the Sermon on the Mount” discusses two important issues related to Jesus’s sermon on the beatitudes – honor and shame. In an honor-shame culture such as the Mediterranean, Hardison explains, honor was highly regarded in all aspects of social life, from business transactions to familial arrangements. It was an individual’s honor which determined an individual’s place in the social group, with whom he would do business or marry into. Losing one’s honor was shameful, as it meant social exclusion and loss of whatever power one possessed in the community (2010, p. 24-25). Among the people of Israel, loss of honor also meant disfavor before God. In other words, they were either being punished for their sins or had inherited the sins of their fathers.

In the sermon registered by Matthew and Luke, Jesus’s audience comprises people who, for various reasons, had lost their honor and lived in shame. His heart went out, especially, to the poor and social outcasts, the persecuted and the hungry that had no place in society. Contrary to the religious leaders of the time who shunned outsiders, Jesus offered them love and spiritual relief. As a kind of Christ figure, Baby Suggs gathers around her in the Clearing the destitute of the community, those whose honor as fathers, mothers, or children had been taken away and relegated to shame. As society had cursed their souls and bodies, her sermon urges them to claim their honor back by loving each and every part of their bodies: “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it” (2004, p. 103). They had first to re-claim their self-love before they could face their oppressors. Therefore, the rituals Baby Suggs conducts in the Clearing aim at restoring honor, self-love and respect in a group relegated to social exclusion, when all they had been taught was to hate their bodies. Because their race and skin color were considered a curse, they had no place in mainstream white Christian society. The ritual of dancing, crying, and laughing certainly helped the group to purge their held-up anxieties and fears. Yet, more than that, the ritual reenactment of their oppression serves to bring the group together, reinforce community bonds, and at the same time foster individual empowerment.

The novel ends with a final ritual of cleansing and restoration whereby the house at 124 is finally rid of the evil child who had been plaguing Sethe and Denver. It all started when Denver decided she had had enough of Beloved’s bossing around and Sethe’s unquestioning submission to the girl’s

caprices. Sethe and Beloved had been playing for several weeks and had grown extremely attached to each other. If at first they included Denver in their games and outdoor activities, they later treated her as if she were a nuisance, an impediment to their full joy as mother and daughter. Yet, Denver soon notices that their close attachment has an evil edge to it. As time goes by, Sethe loses her assertiveness as Beloved starts to make more and more demands, drawing all attention to her. It comes to a point when all Sethe seems to care about is Beloved's well-being. It does not take long for Denver to realize that "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw" and "Beloved was making her pay for it" (2004, p. 295). When Sethe abandons her job, stops providing for the family, and loses all interest in anything besides Beloved, Denver feels it is time to "step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (2004, p. 286). Denver's first step is to reach out to the community and ask for food. If at first the families are reluctant to help because they remember Sethe's evil act and later her pride after she had left prison, they rapidly realize it is about time to put the past behind and recognize that at least the daughter had had the courage to make peace with the community. Baskets or plates of food, accompanied by notes or in anonymity, start to appear at Sethe's doorsteps.

Yet, despite this outpour of solidarity, there is no sign of relief at 124, for Beloved continues on her mission to drain out all of Sethe's physical and psychological strength. Denver realizes she had to take a further step and report what is really taking place. Afraid of the repercussions, she had informed Beloved was a cousin who had settled in their house and got sick, but the women soon realize that no such a cousin existed. It takes the women in the community some time to digest the fact that Sethe's daughter has returned from the other side to punish her mother. When they feel ready, a group of thirty women sets out to confront whatever evil spirit is causing such havoc at Sethe's house. The group walks to Sethe's house armed with Christian faith, bibles, religious songs, and prayers; some also bring amulets "stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts" (2004, p. 303). None of the women could say for sure what happened during this final confrontation with the ghost. A few days later, Paul D and Stamp Paid talked about the event and the contradictory reports that were going around in the community. Some of the women said that after they had said a prayer and started singing, they saw a naked woman standing next to Sethe in a position of power. Ella, the one who had convinced the women to take action, said she saw a pregnant girl holding hands with Sethe and "Sethe looked like a little girl beside it" (2004, p. 312). Besides the women, Mr. Bodwin, who had come over to pick up Denver to work, reported seeing a black naked woman at first and later Sethe running with an ice picket and the

women piling up on her. Later, a boy who was roaming in the woods behind the house reported seeing a naked woman rushing through the woods “with fish for hair” (2004, p. 315). As Paul D later remarked, there was only one point of agreement: “first they saw it and then they didn’t”.

A close look at this final scene reveals, once again, Morrison’s focus on rituals and their role in processes of purification and restoration of both individuals and communities. Here, similar to the days when Baby Suggs used to gather people in her house, food sharing and fellowship become rituals of restoration and emotional healing. It is interesting that when Denver reaches out to the community, the first thing the women remember were the feasts and how Baby Suggs’ house used to be a place of nurturing and mutual support. Of all the memories, a crucial one is their remembrance of “the party with twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry mash” (2004, p. 293). This remembrance is significant because it was the event which triggered all the anger and rancor leading to the community’s silence when the four horsemen came to claim Sethe and her children. Yet, whereas in the past that particular day of abundance at Baby Suggs’ had elicited contradictory feelings of joy and envy, their present sharing and fellowship becomes a ritual of renovation and redemption. As they bring food, day in day out, to Sethe’s doorstep, the community is able to heal and restore the bonds severed on the fatidic day they had left Baby Suggs’s house full of envy and rancor.

The ritual continues in front of Sethe’s house as the women get ready to confront the evil child, the agent of so much disorder in Sethe’s life. This time singing and praying serve as the instruments to confront painful memories, mend broken ties, and in the process, help Sethe to get rid of the ghost that has been draining out her life. It is not clear what they do exactly. The narrator mentions that the women kneel down and start singing and praying, but no audible words can be heard, only amens and nods of agreement. Then they “take a step back to the beginning” when “there were no words” but sounds (2004, p. 305). It is not clear, either, what beginning this is about, but the text suggests that as ritual of cleansing and forgiveness, the past needs to be revisited, confronted, re-enacted so as to achieve healing. That is why the moment the women see the house their memories take them back to the day when they feasted, laughed, and enjoyed the company of friends and neighbors at Baby Suggs’s. They go back to the day when they were young and happy “playing at Baby Suggs’s yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day” (2004, p. 304). In other words, as ritual, the songs allow them to relive the day when the community was taken over by anger and envy, and in the process, expunge all the poison that had kept them away from Baby Suggs’s legacy of love and charity. Sethe is also affected by the music. The sounds take her back to the days when Baby Suggs gathered the community and urged them to sing out their sorrows, pains, and hopes. When she steps out and sees the women singing, she relives those days at the Clearing and is

able to gather the strength to confront the past as well. The salvific effects of the songs and prayers can be seen in the way the narrator describes how she feels: “It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (2004, p. 309). Sethe’s final run towards Mr. Bodwin, presuming, in her sick mind, him to be Schoolteacher, is part of her confrontation of a past that still has power over her. The women, of course, stop her before she kills again, this time not letting her commit the mistake that had placed her in jail, destroyed a family, and marred a whole community for so long.

CLOSING REMARKS

Beloved aptly illustrates the various strategies black communities have developed to fight oppression, persecution and epistemic violence. Here, ritual performances, either open or disguised, are particularly effective in helping communities and individuals in processes of psychological healing and communal bonding. To explore the full potential of this millenarian activity, Morrison blends African spiritual traditions and Christian rituals, thereby privileging a syncretic worldview and form of religious worship. The various rituals Morrison stages out throughout the novel attest to their power of bringing people together, curtailing violence and providing communal catharsis in times of despair.

Another important aspect is the role women play in these rites of cleansing and communal healing. As Roxanne R. Reed observes Morrison places women at center stage in *Beloved*: by means of music, dance, prayers, and assistance to the needy, she endows them with “spiritual authority and feminine theological practice” (2007, p. 57). As a community leader, Baby Suggs knows how to tap into the powers of rituals to promote stability and harmony in the community. As the text shows, from the gatherings in Baby Suggs’ house, where food and shelter were made available, to the services in the Clearing, where spiritual nurturing and guidance were provided, ritual takes numerous shapes and achieves various purposes. When Denver looks out for assistance, it is Mrs. Jones and, ultimately, Ella, who rallies the community to step in and provide Sethe with much needed assistance. It is Ella who encourages and leads the women in the final confrontation with the evil child.

In sum, *Beloved* illustrates Morrison’s efforts to keep alive African Americans’ rich repertoire of stories, beliefs, and rituals. More than that, she shows how ritual practices have empowered black communities and enabled them to develop strategies to resist oppression and epistemic violence.

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