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Lori L. Cook  
*University of Texas at Tyler*

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EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL TERRITORIALITY THROUGH THE DOMESTIC  
GOTHIC IN BELOVED AND MAMA DAY

by

LORI COOK

A thesis/dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English  
Department of Literature and Languages

Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D., Committee Chair  
College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler  
December 2016

The University of Texas at Tyler  
Tyler, Texas


This is to certify that the Master's Thesis/Doctoral Dissertation of


LORI COOK

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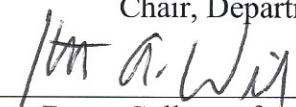
Approvals:

  
Thesis/Dissertation Chair: Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D.

  
Member: Anne Beebe, Ph.D.

  
Member: Catherine Ross, Ph.D.

  
Chair, Department of English

  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

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## Dedication

It is with profound gratitude that I dedicate this thesis to my precious family and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. I am overwhelmed and blessed by the endless amount of love, encouragement, and prayers I have received from so many. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.

To my parents, Jackie and Hazel Rigdon, who taught me the meaning of love, the value of learning, and importance of family. You are dearly loved and deeply respected. I am fortunate to have siblings who are also my friends and each of you have encouraged me in some special way. Thank you. Enduring friendship is a rare gift and I have been blessed twice over in Danielle Hanna and Victoria Pearson. Danielle, I look forward to many more years together. Victoria, you are more than a friend, loved like a sister, and treasured in my heart. After nearly thirty years together, our bond goes beyond words.

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Abstract

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL TERRITORIALITY THROUGH THE FEMALE  
GOTHIC IN BELOVED AND MAMA DAY

Lori Cook

Thesis/dissertation Chair: Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Tyler  
December 2016

The novels, *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, and *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor, contain narratives of families with a history of slavery that explore how their female protagonists claim their identities within the new boundaries of freedom. Using a framework of the Domestic Gothic, this paper explores how formerly enslaved female characters claim new psychological territory in bounded domestic spaces by using the chores they were forced to perform during their times of slavery as a means to independence. Domestic duties such as cooking and gardening along with magical and religious ceremonies and acts of violence are passed down through the generations. They become a pathway to autonomy and reclaimed family memories. Yet, paradoxically, the Gothic message plays out in the domestic sphere of the female protagonists in both books, as their personal and communal slave histories come back to haunt the present day through the completion of



every day chores and duties that remind them of the terrors of the past. The purpose of this paper is to explore how these women claim their own identities in a time when African American women were considered commodities.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In Toni Morrison's, *Beloved*, and *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor, postmodern slave narratives delve into the history "that is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 323). The female characters in both novels represent the progression of claiming the territory of the self in the wake of slavery. Both authors use the Gothic genre, with an emphasis on the sub-genre, Domestic Gothic, and Gothic tropes to explore the slave history that haunts and influences the present life of the female characters of Baby Suggs and Sethe from *Beloved*, and Ophelia and Miranda from *Mama Day*. Gothic tropes such as haunted houses, dark forests, ghosts, and magic are used to highlight the past that comes back to haunt the previously enslaved women as they explore their new-found freedom. According to Allan Lloyd Smith, "the Gothic...is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts, corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself" (Smith 1). Morrison's double entendre, "This is not a story to pass on," expresses the intention of Smith's definition of the Gothic genre within the two novels (Morrison 323). In this paper, I will narrow the definition of the Gothic in general to the Domestic Gothic to better explore Morrison's and Naylor's novels. The Domestic Gothic is revealed through common household chores, cooking, food, or female sexuality when they take on horrific, uncanny, transgressive, or excessive attributes. The chores, act of cooking, or the food itself takes on the *Unheimliche* in the home. When everyday tasks take on characteristics

of the abnormal, surreal, or supernatural, it becomes a reminder of the traumatic or fragmented past experienced by the female characters. The transgressive and excessive are exposed when characters overstep physical and psychological boundaries considered normal by society revealing the supernatural. Using the Domestic Gothic lens to explore the rituals and inclusionary and exclusionary tactics that the women utilize to stake a claim to the psychological territory of the self will open the fragmented, traumatic past. This allows the characters to create an identity.

Morrison and Naylor use domestic chores, cooking and food, spiritual explorations, magic rituals, and violence as expressions of the Domestic Gothic to reveal how the characters are suppressed or objectified when used as slaves. Conversely, these same chores and experiences are also used to show how the women claim their territory in their personal space as free women. Each of these physical acts symbolize the mental and emotional parts of the women, which will be represented in this paper by the term psychological territory. In the case of *Baby Suggs* and *Sethe*, these duties directly relate to the work the women performed as slaves, which adds to the Gothic subtext of the novels concerning the past coming back to haunt the present. With regard to *Ophelia* and *Mama Day*, the modernity of the setting alters some of the chores, but the intent of identity exploration remains the same. The spiritual or magical aspects of their psychological territory is a facet of the self that is explored in order to lay claim to their spiritual identity of the heart and the mind. This relates specifically to *Baby Suggs* and *Mama Day* as the matriarchal leaders of their respective families. The process is given as an example of its effects seen within the individual, family unit, and community, thus making it a progressive feature of psychological territory. This paper contends that the

ritualistic domestic chores performed by Baby Suggs, Sethe, Ophelia, and Miranda as framed by the Domestic Gothic are a pathway to identity in their bounded domestic space in a place and time where formerly enslaved African American females were not given the freedom or opportunity to openly explore the self. These domestic duties carry forward to future generations, reiterating the influence and power of slavery over families and communities.

The themes of Gothic are of central interest to my critical lens in order to further delineate how Morrison's and Naylor's novels can be explored. The sub-genre of the African American Gothic was born from American Gothic; the Domestic Gothic and the Female Gothic applies to all areas of Gothic study and can apply to both texts. In an effort to clarify the critical lens used, it is necessary to briefly explain the Gothic, its history, various themes, and the ways it will be applied to the texts. Fred Botting, in his informational text, *Gothic*, explores the history of the genre and how it has developed, beginning with its European roots to America's fledging appropriations and consequent political and social individualization of the term Gothic. Botting's text examines how the Gothic uses excess, transformation, and diffusion to define the concepts that make up the genre. Excess and ambiguity, as Smith agrees, are explored in Gothic literature throughout the centuries. The eighteenth-century European Gothic focused on "haunted ... rationality and morality," which moved into "Romantic idealism and individualism" and "the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence" (Botting 1). The various "Gothic atmospheres" continue to signal the past's haunting return to the present evoking "terror and laughter" (1). These elements have been constant reminders of the genre's "counter narrative," highlighting "the underside of enlightenment and humanist values"

(2). Botting states, the “Gothic condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” (2). Because excess and the ambiguous nature of the Gothic are “signs of transgressions,” the narrative moves “beyond the bounds of reality and possibility” (6). This transition outside reality then becomes “a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue, and propriety; transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits” (7). The novels under study, written in the twentieth century, have the layered characteristics of the Gothic excesses, transgressions, and tropes from the past, which poses an ironic twist considering the purpose of Gothic narrative. The movement beyond reality is what allows the narrative to reveal the traumatic past through Gothic tropes and repetitious duties. The common tropes of the Gothic genre are castles, old houses, dark and terrifying bouts with nature relating to the sublime, explorations of subterranean caverns or dungeons, doubling, mirrors, horrifying images of the self, specters or hauntings of ghosts, physical and psychological frontiers or borders, and other forms that bring about a sense of uncanny or terror in the telling. Botting, in his estimation of what defines the Gothic, concludes that “[t]he diffusion of Gothic forms and figures over more than two centuries makes the definition of a homogeneous generic category exceptionally difficult” (14). Apart from the period when “key Gothic texts were produced...it is impossible to define a fixed set of conventions” (15). The sheer amount of what can be considered Gothic, as well as the ambiguous nature of the genre, accounts for Botting’s assessment.

Smith's history of the American Gothic in his text, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*, states that "although American Gothicists participated in a wider literary tradition, the circumstances of their own history and the stresses of their particular cultural and political institutions mean that a series of significant inflections determined a Gothicism that differs considerably from British or European Gothic" (29). In exploring the diverse Gothic themes related to American Gothic, he finds that slavery and discrimination becomes a shadowy endowment of the literature, which continues to inform the Gothic works of today. *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* states that "African American Gothic, like its white American counterpart, is preoccupied with slavery and its formidable and multifaceted legacy, especially the issue of race relations (Davison). Teresa Goddu researches the historic link into how the Gothic reveals the slave narrative. In a chapter she contributed to *Gothic Topographies: Language, Nation Building, and 'Race,'* she states that the Gothic was used by the anti-slavery abolitionists to inspire action against deplorable horror of slavery. In doing so, it had the potential to "turn the horror into mass entertainment" out of a "voyeuristic" nature (Goddu 73). However, the "Anglo-American Gothic" also helped to "coalesce slavery into a culturally coherent image," and "provided discursive terms and rhetorical register in which the unspeakable about slavery was spoken" (74). Smith considers it an "[a]dvantage--perhaps even [inevitable]" that the locus of the "other" is encountered in the Gothic. This permits the "unvoiced" feminine character used by the Female Gothic to be fleshed out in a patriarchal society, and the Domestic Gothic then allows for the horror to be explored within the home.

The definition of Female Gothic was first given by Ellen Moers “simply referred to the work written by women in the mode of the Gothic since the eighteenth century” (Wallace 455). However, this definition has been challenged and adapted due to the complexity of what the Female Gothic represents with its ability to expose the oppressions of female characters in a male dominated society. The Female Gothic was originally applied to works that “centralize a heroine who is threatened with imprisonment in a castle or great house by a male tyrant (often a father or father substitute) who escapes through labyrinthine passages and sublime landscapes to marry the man she loves and, often, find her lost mother” (Wallace 456). The genre has evolved to highlight the autonomy sought by women in a patriarchal class system, explore the mother-daughter relationship, delve into the Otherization of females, perform psychological explorations of the feminine, historicize texts and female roles within the context of political milieu, and confirm the use of women as commodities in a capitalistic economy (Wallace<sup>1</sup>; Wallace and Smith<sup>2</sup>).

Regarding the Domestic Gothic, which is the focus of this paper, Smith links the “hearth” or home to Sigmund Freud’s “unpacking of the uncanny as “*das Unheimliche*,” where *heimliche* may mean homely, domestic, thus leading to [the] recognition of the uncanny as in part at least, the strange within the familiar: ‘that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’” (Smith 94). In another section of his text, Smith simplifies the explanation by saying, “the meaning of the unhomely...can be understood as equivalent to the “domestic terror” where the “house, not the castle, becomes the site of trauma; its terror deriving from the familiar inmates instead of some external threat” (75). In this vein, the stories of *Beloved* and *Mama Day*

participate in the Domestic Gothic. *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* states that the “domestic becomes Domestic Gothic proper when everyday matters relating to the home become magnified to nightmare proportions framed by recognizably Gothic tropes and presented in the language of excess” (Hartnell-Mottram). In this respect, *Beloved*, which has been called Morrison’s “Gothic masterpiece,” invites the reader into the haunted home of 124 Bluestone Road (Hartnell-Mottram). This paper will focus on an under-explored aspect of the Domestic Gothic; the domestic duties that reveal the suppression and trauma of the past as the women simultaneously claim their surrounding space and psychological territory through the completion of these tasks. The household chores are traumatic reminders from the past of work done while enslaved. With this lens, the nature of the Domestic Gothic allows for a unique exploration that combines the bounded space of the home, the psyche, and the progressive nature of relationships and the community. The passages from *Beloved* and *Mama Day* to be explored relate to the characters’ experiences as women in the domestic sphere where corroded and suppressed aspects of their lives arise through Gothic tropes and elements. The subjugation of the women will be revealed through the excesses of their respective narratives as well as explication of symbols that relate to the self and the community. The psychological claims on territory by Baby Suggs, Sethe, Ophelia, and Miranda will be explored and intertextual examination of the novels under study will occur to show the progressive nature of subjective and communal effects on a strengthened or weakened identity for these characters.



## Chapter Two

### *Beloved*

Baby Suggs is the first occupant of the house on 124 Bluestone Road before the rest of her family escape from slavery and join her there. She attempts to lay claim to physical and psychological territory through the spiritual explorations she performs. These life-altering explorations of freedom occur prior to the murder of the infant, Beloved, and Beloved's subsequent haunting of the house. These soulful events are for the benefit of herself, her family, and the community. Baby Suggs' beginnings are critical to the progression of the characters in the novel as Morrison explores the individual's and the community's ability to gather and form an identity. Using Baby Suggs as an illustration demonstrates how the modeling of independence alters the perception of a family and an entire community. The identities discovered bring about long term changes, not only to the individual claiming selfhood, but also to the collective community observing and affected by that example. Additionally, Baby Suggs' example exposes her struggles with the wearing mental torment of slavery. Because the ghost of Beloved symbolized the haunting of their slave past, Baby Suggs' inability to carry forward when the community rejects her triggers her breakdown, suggesting that the need for healing and wholeness comes not only from within the individual, but demands the support of the community as well. This portion of the essay lays the groundwork for how a newly freed slave learns to claim territories of domestic and mental space to establish a sense of self and place.

Morrison utilizes memory flashbacks in order to reiterate the haunting of slavery and how memory enables and reveals the behaviors of individuals, families, and communities. The novel begins after Baby Suggs has died and, like a Gothic haunting, she returns in the retelling. Baby Suggs is freed from the grasp of slavery by her son, Halle, “[a] twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change” (Morrison 13). Baby Suggs is sent to a free area in Ohio where she will live in a house owned by an abolitionist, Mr. Bodwin. The house and territory, although owned by the white man who believes in her right to freedom, still needs to be claimed for herself. Baby Suggs, “who decided that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,’ ... had nothing left to make a living with but her heart,” becomes a leader of the community as an “unchurched preacher” and she holds services in “the Clearing” on a “huge, flat-side rock” (102). The genesis of family and community finding a sense of self and identity lies in Baby Suggs’ spiritual activities in the Clearing. In *Human Territoriality: Its History and Theory*, Robert David Sack states, “Territoriality is intimately related to how people use the land, how they organize themselves in space, and how they give meaning to place” (2). A further definition is “an attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area” (19). This tactic has been used in the West to establish and influence “hierarchical society based on private property which used territory to define and organize its own membership” but also in “social relations” (15). This translates to exclusionary tactics in political areas in the south with regard to slaves and free blacks. Newly freed slaves, or those forced to run away, could make claims on

areas by meaningful rituals in the place they lived; this was accomplished through inclusionary tactics of naming, relationships, and spirituality in their community. It can also be argued that the inverse may occur and that territory can be claimed through exclusionary tactics, such as the physical and vocal rejection of a thing, person, idea, or community. By having her ceremony outside of her home, and not in a church building, Baby Suggs effectively rejects ideological influences, such as organized religion. This space is claimed through personal prayer, praise, dancing, singing, and the crying of the people of the newly freed black community. The people call her “holy”—she is experiencing her own self-awareness and helping others discover their identities for the first time (Morrison 102). One by one, Baby Suggs calls out the people of the community; children, men, and women to “laugh,” “dance,” and “cry” (103). Through these physical expressions of joy, praise, and grief, the community bonds and makes a claim for the space as their own. The calling out that occurs in the Clearing is important because that action is akin to the naming of a person, place, or thing that lays claim to an identity and, therefore, claims territory. She calls out the children to come and “let your mothers hear you laugh” (103). She then cries, “Let the grown men come,” and she then instructs them to “Let your wives and your children see you dance” (103). Lastly, she hollers out to the women, “Cry...For the living and the dead. Just cry” (103). The women cry “without covering their eyes” (103). This passage of the Clearing allows each segment of society, the young and old, male and female, to experience a full spectrum of emotion and is reflective of the natural emotional cycles in life. The scene at the Clearing begins the same way every time, but as it progressed, “[w]omen stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried...”

(103). The children laughing gives hope for the future and reminds the onlookers of the joy of youth. These children are free and their laughter is something that the older generations could not fully experience. Those watching in the Clearing, “could not help but smile” at the sight of the children laughing (103). This example shows that the joy is contagious and is experienced by all those observing the ritual. As Baby Suggs calls for the men, she asks them to dance, another symbol of their freedom. Dancing creates an image of men devoid of chains enjoying unrestricted movement. It is a celebration of the new physical, emotional, and mental freedom. Dancing usually has the emotion of happiness or joy associated with it, and Baby Suggs is creating an opportunity to explore unfamiliar feelings through physical actions. The women are called out to express grief. The act of not covering their eyes as they cry gives the reader the image of an unleashing of pent up emotions, allowing the wounds of the past to be completely exposed. The tears shed are for the “living and the dead.” These tears speak to the losses of the past and the hurts of the present that persist. This outpouring of emotion indicates the effects of the past on the psyches of individuals and their community. The women, as mothers, daughters, sisters, are first given the onus of grief; the grave responsibility of releasing negative feelings for those they have birthed, mothered, or lost. The men and children’s dancing and laughter exhibits freedom and rejoicing. When the roles alternate, the reader is alerted to changes that occur in people as they begin to explore their own thoughts and emotions as well as the interconnection of the trauma suffered by all. In reference to Sack’s theory about claiming territories, this ritualistic spiritual experience claims that space in the Clearing for the individual and the community as a whole. Additionally, Baby Suggs calls the people of the community by name. For a race viewed as less than

human to be called a child, man, or woman, identifies them as people of value. Their feelings are honored and validated because they can express them without reservation. The fact that this validation occurs in a physical space called the Clearing touches on the cathartic healing that occurs when one fully explores the heart and mind. The emotions of the past are cleared and cleansed of traumas and a new identity is claimed. A figurative and literal symbolism takes place in a physical territory for the community and naming adds to this claim of the territory. One of the first decisions that Baby Suggs makes for herself is about her name. She has been called Jenny by her previous owners, and once she is freed, she chooses her married name of Suggs for herself (167). By calling out the people, she gives them an example of how to claim autonomy in their lives.

Sack further defines territoriality as “a strategy to establish different degrees of access to people, things, and relationships” (Sack 20). Baby Suggs attempts to establish a connection to all of these. She tells the congregation:

Here, she said, “in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands...Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either...love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison 103-104)

While Baby Suggs is encouraging her people to love themselves at the spiritual service, she claims territory first by encouraging inclusion in the community, acceptance of the self and the past, but also through exclusion and rejection of the people who have wronged them through slavery. She points out the physical parts of their body that have been abused by slavery, reserving the heart as the place that is prized above all. Baby Suggs has an epiphany of self-awareness after realizing that her body is her own when she recognizes the beating of her heart (167). This is the moment when she passes into

free territory. The heart has significance related to the soul, feelings, love, and emotions in general. The heart is the prize because it is the source of life and in all of these comparisons, Baby Suggs suggests that the body may be injured, but the protected heart gives hope for the future. Baby Suggs carefully guards her heart.

Baby Suggs' impact on the community and family have positive effects about claiming new territory though it does not last for her family. Sethe, Baby Suggs' daughter in law, helps her other three children escape from the plantation, Sweet Home, where they are slaves. Baby Suggs has been tending to the children and waiting for her son, Halle and Sethe, to show up. Sethe, emerges with an infant after running away from Sweet Home and there is immediate trouble. Halle, who was supposed to have escaped at the same time, has not arrived and Baby Suggs, who is afraid to hope, "let[s] the whoop lie—not wishing to hurt his chances by thanking God too soon" (159). She "held her heart still" because she didn't want to hope and bring about disappointment or trouble (159). There is sense of foreshadowing in this passage due to her distrust of having positive things happen.

When Sethe is brought to the house by Stamp Paid, he returns days later to check on the baby, Denver, whom he helped bring to the house. Paid, a secondary character, plays a key role in this passage as a catalyst to the upcoming tragedy. "For private reasons of his own," he treks into the woods, a thorny, dangerous place of biting insects and spiders, to pick two buckets of wild blackberries (160). Stamp Paid represents the community and the history of slavery borne by the community, thus his trek into the forest is not only for him, but for all those affected by slavery. This journey into the woods takes on a Gothic aspect as the blackberries represent something sweet and

wholesome amid the horrors of slavery, and the literal journey into the forest provides a dark and wooded area filled with danger. The metonymy of darkness and peril are used to indicate the trials or torments of life which Stamp has endured and still suffers. Darkness and peril can be considered a threat that the African American community still senses even though they are free. The “blood-drawing thorns thick as knives that cut through his shirts and trousers,” spiders, and biting insects are suggestive of barbaric acts of violence of slavery that each enslaved person bore. In a sense, the blackberries and the restrained “whoop” represent a territory of hope for the future that they are still trying to claim, especially considering what follows with Sethe and her children. The berries, which Stamp Paid picks with “fingertips so gentle not a single one was bruised,” take a long time to reach and taste “so good and happy that to eat them was like being in church...and you felt anointed” (160). They seem to be an offering to the innocence of Denver who has her whole life in front of her as a free person. The unbruised berries are symbolic of the possibilities for Denver and others like her who are born into freedom. The fact that Stamp Paid comes out of the forest with “his shredded clothes, bleeding hands, welted face and neck” indicate the suffering that others endured prior the freedom that is coming to their community.

Sack states that “territories require constant effort to establish and maintain” (19). What occurs next is a celebration for Baby Suggs’ family, the neighbors, and herself. The party starts with a few blackberry pies that turns into “food for ninety” (Morrison 161). Baby Suggs’ domestic space, which has been up until this point, a place of safety and community, now becomes a place of contention for the entire community. Referring back to Botting’s statement that excesses are “signs of transgressions” that cause “the

narrative to move beyond the bounds of reality and possibility,” the community’s thoughts the day after the party are excessive. The community reacts angrily at the seemingly supernatural ability and perceived hubris of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs “got proud and let herself be overwhelmed by the sight of her daughter in law and Halle’s children,” and in doing so, she leaves her territory undefended because she “offended [her neighbors] with excess” (173; 163). Excess is revealed by the unseemly surplus of food and in the community’s overreaction to the party. The community takes it personally that they have been excluded from prosperity and wonder why Baby Suggs has been given so many blessings. There is an uncanny amount of food that comes from what should be very little, which is juxtaposed to the neighbors’ lack. In this way, the Gothic is revealed through juxtaposition and duality. Furthermore, the community sees Baby Suggs as set apart from them and they reject her. The community gathers and considers the party,

Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone? Now to take two buckets of blackberries and make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice *and* sugar, batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread, shortbread—it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His powers...(161)

The neighbors see Baby Suggs as having too much and this sets her apart from the rest of the people. They are connected by not only race and slavery, but by being equal in their poverty and class position. They feel threatened by the disparity between Baby Suggs and themselves. She seems overly blessed by the return of her family and by an overabundance of food. They feel that Baby Suggs has overstepped her boundaries when



they say, “[I]oaves and fishes were His powers,” which suggests their envy of her ability to establish and claim identity. This comparison also juxtaposes the physical and the spiritual natures with the allusion to Christ. Because Baby Suggs is a spiritual leader in the community, her alleged hubris simultaneously disappoints and thrills those who are envious of her. Botting states “[r]elations between real and fantastic, sacred and profane, supernatural and natural, past and present, civilized and barbaric, rational and fanciful, remain crucial to the Gothic dynamic of limit and transgression” (Botting 9). Within this context, the excess of the party, the allusion to Christ, and the sin of hubris becomes a juxtaposed Gothic element that allows the extreme to be revealed. The uncanny nature of the food, the anger after the party, the delight in the failure of Baby Suggs, and the breach of the budding relationship between Baby Suggs and the community shows how her psychological and physical territory are harmed by her pride and excess. This is how her territory is left undefended.

Prior to the party, Baby Suggs considers Halle’s escape and she ponders how “Nobody could make it alone...you couldn’t run if you didn’t know how to go. You could be lost forever, if there wasn’t nobody to show you the way” (Morrison 157). This sentiment can apply to Baby Suggs’ situation as a newly freed slave—claiming territory within a space surrounded by strangers and forging her way alone. She is the first of her family to be free, and she only has her limited experience and her heart to guide her. Baby Suggs admits that “the sadness [is] at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self-made its home...fact was she knew more about them [her children] than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (165). These reflective observations show how Baby Suggs, even as a leading matriarch, is still

in the beginning process of finding her authentic self and means to establish agency in her family and her community. The idea of being lost in the self and in darkness introduces the Gothic trope of the woman being lost in labyrinths or in darkness. The community is in the same situation as Baby Suggs with exploring the self and claiming territory, though Baby Suggs attempts to show them the way.

The neighbors' reactions to the party can also be considered an attempt at claiming territoriality within their community. Sack's definition of claiming territory is expressed here as the community makes "an attempt...[as a] group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area" (Sack 19). This response can be observed as a mean-spirited rejection because they participated in the party and enjoyed the celebration. However, the community sees Baby Suggs as a spiritual leader and as one who affects the surroundings by her actions and words. The use of exclusionary tactics to reject Baby Suggs is also used to claim territory for the community. The neighbors compare Baby Suggs' experience as a slave with their own experiences and decide that she has had an easier time than they have. However, Baby Suggs' hip was broken while doing field work. This incident should prove the community wrong in their assumption that Baby Suggs had it easy as a slave. By judging Baby Suggs', they exclude her from the community's common experience. They are "mad" when they consider[ed] how "[I]oaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave" (Morrison 161). This exclusionary tactic claims personal territory for the community by rejecting a person who they feel has overstepped her bounds of authority. Additionally, they feel threatened by her independence. The community is still working out its own exploration of self-identity.

The welcome party for Sethe and Denver is the turning point in the relationships between the major characters and the community. The community is upset at the excessive display of food and pride at the party and the connection between Baby Suggs and the community is broken. The next day when sensing the anger of the neighbors, Sethe sees the schoolteacher coming to retrieve her and the children to return to Sweet Home enslaved. In a fit of madness, rather than have her children go back into the torment of slavery, she attempts to kill the children and she succeeds with Beloved. This moment becomes suspended and suppressed within the dialogue of the novel and will haunt both Sethe, her home, and the community. Morrison describes the scene once, but afterwards it simmers under the dialogue and highlights the horror of the act. After spending time in jail accompanied by her infant daughter, Denver, Sethe comes back to the place where she had committed the horrible crime and continues to raise her surviving children: Bugler, Howard, and Denver.

The Domestic Gothic is apparent in the descriptions of Baby Suggs' house. The house is personified as "spiteful" and "[f]ull of a baby's venom" with all its occupants aware of the haunting and who is responsible (Morrison 3). The hauntings refer to the family's slave history as well as the ghostly presence of Beloved. The house cannot be a place of comfort or rest because of the history of inhabitants. Sethe's two sons run away when the hauntings become too intense. It is important to note that the men in this family leave the women to face life alone. Baby Suggs' husband ran away as well, leaving her to stay enslaved. The women are forced to carry a heavy burden in a time when they inhabited the lowest station of society. It is vital to recognize the absence of the men in order to understand the underlying message that slavery is a patriarchal system of

oppression and subjugation. Morrison shows this through the abandonment of the women.

Morrison depicts spectral hauntings as they relate to food in the beginning of the novel. Sethe, as mother of the children, needs to provide sustenance for their survival and the food she provides become a symbol of ruined comfort and is transformed into a thing of dread and to be feared. Something that should have brought contentment, now contains a sense of horror due to the past coming back to haunt the present. This can relate to Smith's connection of Freud's theory of *das Unheimliche* with regard to what is homely becoming a point of terror. The home as a place of comfort and solace is instead horrifying to its occupants because of the past history of slavery that is returning in the form of the baby ghost, Beloved. The sons, Buglar and Howard, experience terror in the home when the ghost presents herself in violent and disturbing ways in the mirror and cake. Buglar ran away "as soon as merely looking at a mirror shattered it," and Howard left "as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake...Neither boy wanted to see another kettle of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door-sill" (3). These tropes relating to a broken mirror and ruined food highlight the lack of comfort and security for the individual and family. The mirror trope reveals the use of terror as Buglar sees the familiar image of himself and the mirror breaks. Mirrors, as previously stated, are common tropes of the Gothic that can be used in texts to convey a sense of horror and the uncanny when something familiar, like one's own face, becomes a source of the *Unheimliche*. A common myth regarding mirrors in relation to the Gothic is that the dead are trying to communicate when one breaks. Another superstition is that there will be seven years of bad luck when a mirror

breaks. The terror that occurs with food is also related to the uncanny in the home. Where there should contain a sense of security and comfort, the ruined food expresses the uncanny through the ghostly hauntings of Beloved with the physical representations of baby hands that present themselves in a cake. Something that is typically considered a treat and enjoyable, instead becomes a site of horror. The home, which is their first place to dwell in freedom, is revisited by the suppressed memories and traumas of the past. The attempt to claim an identity in the domestic space is thwarted and the family is tormented in the attempt to claim their psychological territory in the home. The children, as ones who need care, are deeply affected by the loss of comfort. This attempt relates not only to Sethe, but to the character of Baby Suggs as well.

Baby Suggs has very few memories of her children, but the one she has is related to bread. She bemoans this fact to Sethe stating, "I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil...My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I can remember" (6). The ruined food is symbolic of a future compromised by past traumas suffered by the parents and the children as well. Bread can also be interpreted as an allusion to the symbol of life that is claimed by the Christian Messiah, Jesus, who calls himself "the bread of life" (*New International Version*, Jn. 6.35). Using this idea, Baby Suggs' rejection of the church can be seen in the burned bread. The spiritual and physical metaphors of bread as life both relate to the psychological territory of a person. The mental, spiritual, emotional and physical life of the enslaved person is ruined by the slave experience; this is symbolized by the burnt bottom of the bread. Baby Suggs also relates the child's memory to the

bottom of the bread, which is not only burned, but is the least desirable portion of the loaf and so relates to the lowest status in society.

Another passage makes use of bread as a trope of the Domestic Gothic with Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, another former slave of Sweet Home. It is used again to correlate with the lack of care for a child, and it sexualizes Sethe. According to Allene Nichols, author of “The Witch, the Cauldron, and the Inverted Cooking Ritual,” when the average events of life become radically changed, there is a greater need to maintain a sense of normalcy with regard to “standardized community values” (1). These values become repetitive and take on symbolic meaning, like cooking. Cooking then becomes ritualistic. Nichols’ claim reinforces gender roles as well as sexualizes cooking, especially with women who are capable of bearing children. Nichols relates this to Eve eating the fruit in the Garden of Eden, which occurred to “influence the only other member of her society” (2). Nichols contends that this action then relates food to childbirth. She continues that at certain periods of history, if a woman ate with a man who was not her husband, it was indicative of the possibility of sexual relations between them (2). It is my contention that this situation occurs between Sethe and Paul D. Morrison uses the imagery of male and female genitalia while making bread to foreshadow the sexual interaction between Paul D and Sethe.

Paul D arrives at Sethe’s house and encounters the “pool of red and undulating light” that is the ghost of Beloved (Morrison 10). He must walk through the spectre to make his way to the kitchen. Sethe has offered to cook for him and she begins to make biscuits.

Sethe took a little spit from the tip of her tongue with her forefinger. Quickly, lightly she touched the stove. Then she trailed her fingers through the flour,

parting, separating small hills and ridges of it, looking for mites. Finding none, she poured soda and salt into the crease of her folded hand and tossed both into the flour. Then she reached into a can and scooped half a handful of lard. Deftly, she squeezed the flour through it, then with her left hand sprinkling water, she formed the dough. (18-19)

This passage illustrates the skillfulness of Sethe's cooking abilities. She is so accustomed to baking that, with a brief touch of the stove, she is able to test the temperature. She is sure handed, swift, and confident in her movements. This is clearly a deeply ingrained part of her psychological territory. This baking and attention to detail also indicate the possibility of a future relationship with Paul D, especially in consideration of Nichol's interpretation of eating with a male. I have contended that this passage can be analyzed for its sexual nature that would support both positions of bread as life and women as sexual objects within the domestic boundary. The flour, representing the male counterpart is separated into phallic symbols of "hills and ridges." Sethe also checks for bugs to indicate possible corruption of the flour. Her exploration of the flour is symbolic of searching for flaws in Paul D's character. In her representation of the female, genitalia is symbolized by her hand that is "creased...and folded," as this indicates the hidden folds of womanhood, much like a labyrinth or tunnel. The result of the union is dough, or the ability to create life together.

This moment plays out as the two characters bond over events of the past. At this point in the novel, Sethe confides in Paul D about what occurred when she ran away from Sweet Home while she was pregnant. She tells him about being whipped and that she has a "tree on her back" from the scarring (10). She reveals that she was raped by the boys who lived on Sweet Home. She says:

I had milk. I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl [Beloved]. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and

Buglar...All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it...Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. (19)

For Sethe, feeding Beloved and others is analogous to claiming psychological territory of her body, heart, and her identity. Because the nourishment that only she could provide was forcibly taken from her, it is another reminder that her family could be removed on a whim. She has no control or autonomy even when it comes to feeding her baby. The milk, symbolic of innocence and purity, is also synonymous with identity and hope; hope for herself and her children. She can produce the milk herself and her body is her own territory. By taking the milk, the boys breach her psychological and physical territory and take her promise and sovereignty as a mother. Barbary J. Webb, author of “‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken:’ Reflections on Teaching *Beloved*,” proposes that the scene where Sethe is “mammary raped...conforms to the outline of a primal scene in that it is a witnessed sexual act committed on a mother” (Webb 97). Webb explains that there are three deviations to the passage that contribute to the “black devaluation” effort to dominate the culture (97). First, “the sexual act is not performed by the black biological father or a father figure, but by two white son figures: the nephews; the act itself is deviant--they suck milk from Sethe’s breasts; and the witnesses are not children, but schoolteacher and Halle, the father of Sethe’s children, who hides in the loft” (97). Webb continues that this “points to this white slave-holding culture’s attempts to disempower both the black mother and the black father...it dehumanizes Sethe because she is milked like an animal” and “given the life-sustaining power of maternal milk, when the boys suck the milk from her breasts, symbolically they divest the black mother of her power and ingest it” (97). This simultaneously “castrates” Sethe’s husband, Halle (97). Sethe is



wounded by the rape and assault, and she never recovers from the horror of it. The theft of her milk becomes more important than the whipping she receives for telling the Master's wife about the assault. When Paul D is outraged about the beating, he questions her about the use of cowhide on her back to which Sethe replies by reiterating the theft, "And they took my milk!" (Morrison 20). The emotional weight of the beating she nearly dismisses, but the affront of stealing from her baby is something she never overcomes.

It is at this point after Sethe's confession that Morrison allows for the intimation of a sex act. "Once more Sethe touched a wet finger to the stove. She opened the oven door and slid the pan of biscuits in. As she raised up from the heat she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts" (20). This touch results in Sethe having a cathartic episode of crying. The ghost of Beloved reacts violently to the affection between Sethe and Paul D while Denver has "terror in her eyes, a vague smile on her lips" (21). The two shared slave pasts combine and the "haint" buckles the floor in a rage leaving the house wrecked with furniture upturned. Paul D counters with his own angry defense against the ghost, shouting for it to leave. After the paranormal events cease, Sethe and Paul D go upstairs and consummate their relationship.

Sethe's use of food as a tool to connect to another person continues in the novel when she and Paul D begin their relationship in earnest. She plans a dinner and wants to make him something "difficult" to honor her "newer, stronger life" (117). This further supports Nichol's theories regarding the sexualization of women and how cooking ritualizes and reiterates gender role. Her ability to perform in the kitchen becomes a part of her identity as she equates the ritualistic cooking as part of her. This is something that is decidedly different than when she was in the Sweet Home kitchen where she needed

“to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it...the day she forgot was the day the butter wouldn’t come or the brine in the barrel blistered her arms” (27). The food she is preparing for someone else, as a Gothic motif, becomes a point of contention and hurtful, reminding her that she, as a slave, is not allowed to claim an identity. Salsify is a plant whose root is prepared for food. When Sethe forgets the salsify in Mrs. Garner’s kitchen, the food she prepares does not turn out the way it is supposed to because she does not have a claim on the space or herself. It is significant that only the root is edible as it becomes symbolic of Sethe attempting to plant herself into a space. The need to “feel like some part of it [the kitchen space] was hers” illustrates a relation to the self and a sense of control over her own life when she is in the familiar territory of the kitchen. The domestic boundaries of the kitchen become the area of knowing and of exploring who she is.

When Sethe and Paul D go upstairs, Denver is left alone with the memories of her brothers and bereft of the haunting of her sister ghost. Beloved has become a source of companionship to her. Again, Morrison uses the bread as a symbol for the haunting of the past and a life harmed by slavery.

Denver ashes over the fire and [pulls] the biscuits from the oven. The jelly cupboard was on its back, its contents lying in a heap...she took out a jar, and, looking for a plate, found half of one by the door...She took a biscuit and pulled off its black top. Smoke curled from the soft, white insides...Denver dipped a bit of bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserably she ate it. (22-23)

This passage completes the circle of how slavery affects Baby Sugg’s family through time. With Baby Suggs, the bread was burned on the bottom and with her grandchild the bread is burned on the top. Morrison uses the varying sides of burned bread to signify the

progressive, lifelong effects that slavery has on a family. The color of the bread, black on the outside, white inside, is obviously symbolic of the two races. The white-hot bread is symbolic of the pain and anguish white slave owners caused for the slaves they owned. The image of heat relates to suffering. The fact it is the only edible piece of the bread illustrates that whites were unharmed by slavery and the blackened crust could even be said to protect the inside. It could be interpreted as protecting the slave owners from the hardships of the work, protecting the economy in that slaves produced the commodities and protected the way of life for slave owners. She only finds “half a plate,” indicating the smaller portion that she will receive in life. Additionally, Denver literally receives less bread because of the ruined outsides. The misery Denver experiences introduces a Gothic element into the passage because something wholesome is ruined by the past. She ingests it like a bastardized communion wafer--suffering and without hope.

There are two other incidents important to the theme of bread and milk as symbols of life that involve Baby Suggs and her son, Halle. Baby Suggs has a different experience with bread and milk, and when she arrives in Ohio it has an ambiguous symbolism. When she is brought to Mr. Bodwin’s house, she is fed cornbread and milk by the black servant girl, Janey. In this instance, she must be convinced to eat as she “crumbled the bread into the hot milk and discovered she was hungrier than she had ever been in her life and that was saying something” (170). This experience is hopeful and comforting to Baby Suggs. The bread and milk mixed together is nourishing, filling, and satisfying. Because it is literally her first day of freedom, her first meal, the symbolic use of bread as life and milk is something pure and untainted. She is full of hope at that moment. However, she is finally free and is “hungrier than she has ever been,” and this

demonstrates ambiguity in relation to her personal history. She is now responsible for her own care and she is soon to be faced with her past. In her freedom, she has been given the opportunity to heal, however, she must face what has happened to her. The hunger she feels can be related to a foreshadowing of the pain that is to come in realizing that even though she is free physically, she still must deal with the psychological territory that has been claimed by slavery. Even at the end of her life, there is the link to milk. Sethe compares her passing as being “soft as cream” to indicate an easy death, though it was anything but peaceful (8). As a symbol, it is interesting to consider that milk takes on many properties. It can curdle and still be edible, which is comparable to having difficulties in life and still going forward through tribulations. This can be related to the resilience demonstrated by the enslaved African Americans who had to carry forward during these times of trials.

The passage with Halle exposes the heartbreaking mental effects of feeling completely out of control when having to watch the suffering of others. One of the unanswered questions that many slaves had to live with was what became of their family members after they ran away or were sold off. Because Halle never shows up in Ohio, Sethe and the family are in the same predicament. Baby Suggs believes he is dead. Paul D eventually confesses to Sethe that Halle was in the barn the night she was raped and her milk was taken from her. Sethe is devastated and angry at the revelation. Paul D goes on to tell her that seeing her assaulted “broke [Halle] like a twig” (81). He continues, “Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face” (82). Sethe’s ensuing soliloquy deduces that “There is my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on

his mind. And as far as he is concerned, the world may as well know it. And if he was that broken then, then he is also and certainly dead now” (83). The by-products of milk, soured and clabbered, the hopes of freedom stolen from Halle as surely as peace had been stolen from Sethe, are left in smeared remains on the face of a man who bought his mother’s freedom. He tried to run, but is left behind mentally broken from the reprehensible actions of those with the law on their side. These same men who raped Sethe, whipped her and ‘left a tree on her back’ are the same ones who show up at 124 Bluestone road and leave her mentally broken. The text represents her mental instability with the sound of “wings. Little hummingbirds stick[ing] needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat[ing] their wings” (309). The ruined lives that are shown in representations of burned bread, stolen breast milk, and clabbered butter echo the Domestic Gothic that returns over and over throughout the lives of the family suffering through slavery.

Ruth Van Den Akker, argues in her essay, “Hush, Little Baby Ghost: The Postcolonial Gothic and Haunting History in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” that in times of catastrophe, such as Sethe has suffered, stories must be told and “relived in order to come to terms with the trauma of slavery” and heal the past (Van Den Akker 1). In her essay, she focuses on *Beloved*’s haunting of the house, saying it represents the “unresolved trauma” and “silenced history” (3). Sethe’s story becomes every slave’s story and through the telling, it legitimizes each slave’s experience. Through reliving the “rememories” of her life, she has the opportunity to recover from the trauma (13).

The reminders of slavery are not only in their personal memories, but in their work environment as well. Sethe works every day at a diner and “sews a little on the sly”

(Morrison 12). This work she does is the same work she performed at Sweet Home as a slave, and it is all she knows how to do. Baby Suggs has the same experience after she is freed when she cooks and cobbles shoes for a living. These skills become Baby Suggs and Sethe's source of income, which reiterates their position as servants in society, reveals the oppression of their class and sex, and infers their position as commodities. The repetitious nature of their work and station can be considered a Gothic trope because it ties into the after-effects of slavery in their current lives. Sethe vocalizes the need for relationships with women in order to learn how to do new and important things. She states, "I wish I'd known more, but like I say, there wasn't nobody to talk to. Woman, I mean. So I tried to recollect what I'd seen back where I was before Sweet Home. How the women did there. Oh they knew all about it...It's hard, you know what I mean? by yourself and no woman to help you get through" (308-309). Reviewing her past, she reminisces how Baby Suggs taught her that if a baby is only given milk "they don't do things so quick" and she notes that "Milk was all [she] ever had" (307). This sad confession mimics Sethe's training as she tries to find her own territory of the self and claim it. None of the women in her life were around long enough to help and, even then, might not have had the ability to teach her. The milk representing her identity, now has a quality prescribed to it that shows she lacks knowledge and skills. While Sethe has received past guidance from Baby Suggs and others, it isn't enough to fill in for the gaps in her life. All of the women characters are in need of mothering. Each character has a story that relates to a missing mother or a lack of memories about her mother, and in Sethe's children's case, horrific memories of their mother trying to kill them. Sethe's mother, a woman who made the passage from Africa on a ship and was raped repeatedly

by the men on the ship and her slave master, murdered all of the babies she became pregnant with except Sethe. Sethe was the only baby made consensually. She is taken from her mother when she is young and her mother is later murdered. This blocked memory is one that comes back to Sethe when she is in dire need of advice and mothering. The need for feminine companionship and guidance is a vital aspect of identity and development of psychological territory and the lack of it is seen in these characters.

Shardé M. Davis, author of “The Strong Black Women Collective”: A Developing Theoretical Framework for Understanding Collective Communication Practices of Black Women,” explores how black women communicate with one another in social situations and posits that they use “communication patterns of strength as a way of delineating their own safe space defined their racial-gendered identities, cultivating solidarity and pride as a Black women group, and confronting oppressive structures” (28). Davis’ article researches the impact of older female influences on younger black women and how those communication techniques, vernacular, or talk back is used as a defense against “being taken advantage of by outside forces” (29). Referencing a case study done on social identity perspectives, Davis states that group identity imparts a substantial influence on how women feel about themselves and that “when strong ties are formed, it is likely that members will see themselves no longer as idiosyncratic individuals but in terms of attributes of the group...” (29). This theory is especially relevant as it relates to what Sethe and Denver lack when considering Baby Suggs’ passing and the sequestered lives they lead away from the community. When Baby Suggs ceases her activities, it negatively affects her family and the community. Sethe chooses to

remain cloistered after the community's rejection of her. However, Denver has the opportunity to expand her sphere when she reaches out to the community's women for help when Sethe becomes unstable due to the physical reincarnation of Beloved coming to live at 124 Bluestone.

The baby that Sethe killed, Beloved, returns in the form of a 19-year-old girl, the exact age she would have been had she lived, and she continues her destructive effect on the family and community. Denver, who has been obsessed with the ghost all of her life, is forced to take care of her mother and Beloved. The physical return of Beloved plays into the Gothic element that Botting refers to as transgression moving "beyond the bounds of reality and possibility" (6). Additionally, Beloved embodies the return of the repressed from the past. This reincarnation of Beloved, who is a symbol of slavery, throws the household into chaos and forces Sethe and Denver to confront their own actions and take stock of the mental and emotional damage slavery has done to them. Denver is a strong catalyst for change in the family.

Denver is unique among the women in *Beloved*. She is born during her mother's escape; her birth intertwines freedom and a communal link to slavery. Morrison does not include examples of Denver working or being domestic. I believe that this is symbolic because she was not born into servitude. However, she eventually must find work and domestic work is the only type of job she can find. Her inability to find a different type of work demonstrates that psychological territory must be claimed through the domestic by these characters.

Denver is a bitterly lonely and sad child, yet she still sees her own birth as miraculous. That can be attributed to the attention Sethe gives to Denver as she tells her



about her birth story, as well as the hope the story inspires. Denver refers to it as “magic” and thinks of it as a “miracle” (Morrison 36). Sethe tells Paul D that Denver “is a charmed child. From the beginning...Nothing can happen to her...Everybody I knew dead or gone...Not her...Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear I wasn’t going to make it--which meant she wasn’t going to make it either--she pulled a white girl out of the hill. The last thing you’d expect to help” (50). Denver is allowed to stay in jail with Sethe after the murder of Beloved. Sethe emphasizes Denver’s “charmed” life regarding their time in jail, “Rats bit everything in there but her” (51). It’s important to note that Denver’s birth story changes her perception of her future even though her life feels desolate. Denver experiences conflicting emotions regarding her birth because “she loved it because it was all about herself; but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her” (91). Thus, Denver’s birth story is important to the novel’s narrative because she is the first child born into freedom, and she bears the burden of the un-lived past and an unsettled future.

As previously mentioned, Sethe is raped by the schoolteacher’s nephews at Sweet Home and then whipped with a leather strap for telling her mistress about the rape. The whipping causes a gruesome wound that festers on her back. Pregnant, Sethe’s feet are swollen unto bursting from running through the woods without shoes. She is lost and pursued by the schoolteacher from Sweet Home, which points to classic Gothic symbolism in regard to the damsel in distress who is pursued by a dangerous male through the woods. The horrific physical conditions that Sethe endures while giving birth to Denver exemplifies the emotional, physical, and mental tribulations of an enslaved

individual and a community emerging out of slavery into freedom. The wounds on her feet are symbolic of the danger that slaves experienced trying to run away as well as the work endured by all. Her birth pains while wounded signify the personal struggle that each person endures as they become a new person and have to contend with the hurts of the past, as well as the stress of claiming a new identity in an unfamiliar territory. The fact that Sethe is lost appeals to the idea that many are trying to find their way in the new-found freedom and that danger still surrounds the individual and the community. Sethe, while in the woods, meets up with a white indentured servant girl named Amy who saves her and helps her with the birth of Denver.

Tropes of the grotesque and horror appear as Amy treats Sethe's wounds and attempts to ease her discomfort. Amy tends to Sethe during the night by rubbing Sethe's swollen, numb feet, wrapping them with leaves and torn sheets of her shawl, as well as cleaning the deep wounds on Sethe's back with spider webs (93-94). When Amy first sees the bloody stripes, she tells Denver that she has

a tree on her back. 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 lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had some whippings, but I don't remember none like this. (93)

This "tree on her back" is symbolic of her family history, a memorial of the violence of slavery, a reminder of Sethe's rape and escape, and a universal symbol of the physical and emotional scars received by enslaved people everywhere. Each person of significance in Sethe's life has tended to this scar; Amy staunches the flow of blood, Baby Suggs cleans it from infection and covers it in ointment, and Paul D kisses it tenderly in a moment of emotional intimacy and empathy. The whipping wound's significance cannot

be overlooked for Denver considering Sethe was pregnant with her when she was beaten. Denver's position as first freeborn child contains all the history without the memory. Denver does not have the Sethe's understanding of slavery since she never lived it in the same way as her mother and family. I believe, therefore, Denver does not mature and become selfless until she sees what slavery in the physically symbolic form of Beloved does to her own mother.

Denver is born on the river after enduring a night of misery in the woods. The two runaways make their way through the woods to a riverbed in the daylight and there Denver is delivered by Amy in a boat on a river. Sethe crawls into the boat that "had one oar, lots of holes, and two bird nests" (98). During her fierce labor pains, Sethe is lying with water starting to "pool around her hips" as Denver emerges "Face up and drowning in her mother's blood... "Push!" screamed Amy. "Pull," whispered Sethe. And the strong hands went to work a fourth time..." (99). Amy physically pulls Denver from Sethe as the boat filled with holes begins to take on water. Denver's traumatic, yet successful, birth has a prophetic significance of what Denver's life has the potential to be. The women are alone in the woods and a female is birthed on the water teeming with "bluefern." Morrison explains the significance:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them...Often they are mistook for insects--but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one--will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps than the spore itself. On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening, two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue...But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something appropriately and well. (99)

Denver is synonymous with the hope of “the whole generation” and in that moment, a young white girl and a young black girl worked together to bring forth life and do “something appropriately and well.” The entire scene is filled with hope for the relationships between the two races and for women. Women, as the least considered sex, endured terrible abuses without recourse in the courts. Amy, although born free still pays for her mother’s passage as an indentured servant. She is held against her will until the fee is met. Amy’s role in this narrative can be interpreted to represent those in the white community who are affected by slavery’s role on society. She is a part of slavery because of her mother’s decision to sign away her freedom for a passenger ticket. Amy, a victim of the abuse of slavery, sees what slavery does and has compassion towards Sethe, showing that it is possible to come to an understanding between the two races.

When Sethe and Amy part, Amy worries that Denver will never hear about her role of her birth. She says, “She’s never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world? ...“You better tell her. You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston. Sethe...thought, “That’s pretty. Denver. Real pretty” (100). Sethe’s decision to name her baby after Amy gains deeper significance considering the symbolism of hope represented by her birth. There is potential for Denver to cross boundaries that others in her family could not. She is born on a river, a literal boundary with figurative significance. Baby Suggs would encourage Sethe to lay aside her problems and she would tell her, “Lay ‘em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of ‘em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield” (101). The river is always moving and is symbol of cleansing. Denver’s birth brings about a new beginning where

the entire family can begin again. She is not without problems and scars; however, she has not endured what her family experienced as slaves.

Because Sethe is shunned and Baby Suggs retreats from society, Denver is isolated from a sense of community. This is a significant detriment to her development. She knows only a few people and she does not develop social skills, nor does she understand the importance of community. In the early part of the novel, she does not work outside of the home and has been spoiled and protected by her mother. She becomes petulant when things do not revolve around her. She has learned ineffective and detrimental coping mechanisms from her mother and grandmother because they have not had the opportunity to personally grow. Her mother's reaction is to obliterate any chance for the slave master to hurt her children or herself by reacting with extreme violence. When Baby Suggs loses the support of her community, her grandmother gives into negativity. Denver tends to become a recluse, she eats for comfort, and she has selfish inclinations. However, as the novel progresses and Denver begins to understand what Beloved, who is a living symbol for slavery, has done to her mother, she realizes she has different options available and she makes better decisions for herself and her mother's future, even without having that behavior modeled in the home. She becomes the protector of her mother and reaches out to the community; something her mother does not do.

Denver, who idolizes Beloved and believes that she is the physical reincarnation of the daughter her mother killed, comes to see her as the threat that will ruin their future. Denver witnesses Beloved choking her mother and catches her in a lie when she defends herself. It is at this point that Denver "wonders if she had been wrong" about Beloved

(119). This leads to a reflective moment when she remembers “[o]nce upon a time she had known more and wanted to. Had walked a path leading to a real other house. Had stood outside the window listening. Four times she did it on her own...” (119-120). Denver’s understanding that there is more out there began when she was seven years old when she walked to Lady Jones’ house, a teacher of mixed race, who taught the black children in the neighborhood. Denver spent “almost a whole year [in] the company of peers and along with them learned to spell and count” (120). This opportunity for education and expansion of the self is a primary and important difference between her and the matriarchs of her family. Denver considered this time “precious to her, especially because she had done it on her own and was pleased and surprised by the pleasure and surprise it created in her mother and brothers” (120). Denver sees the power in education and how it changes a life. She is religious about her homework, practices daily and “starred every afternoon” at Lady Jones’ (120). Denver remembers that “she was so happy she didn’t even know she was being avoided by her classmates--that they made excuses and altered their pace not to walk with her” (120). However, a boy in her class, Nelson Lord, questions her about her mother and the murder of her sister, and he puts “all the rest that those afternoons held, out of reach forever” (121). In a moment that reveals the uncanny, Denver becomes terrified of her mother as someone unfamiliar. She stops speaking and hearing for two years, choosing to be deaf and mute because of the horror of what Nelson tells her: “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (123). She never went back to Lady Jones and instead “the monstrous and unmanageable dreams about Sethe found release in the concentration Denver began to fix on the baby ghost. Before Nelson Lord, she had been barely

interested in its antics...Now it held for her all the anger, love and for she didn't know what to do with" (121). Morrison advances the vision that young Denver has and "gives her eyes a power even she found hard to believe" (121). Denver focuses on the haunting antics of the baby ghost, Beloved. She begins to speak and hear again when she tells her mother and grandmother that the noise in the house is that of the baby Beloved crawling up the stairs. It is at this point, when Denver recognizes the ghost baby who "signaled another shift in the fortunes of the people of 124. From then on the presence was full of spite" (122). Denver's ability to hear her sister and understand the full implications of what her mother has done changes the nature of the haunting of Beloved. With Beloved being used as a framework for the haunting of slavery, it makes what has occurred evil, spiteful, and vindictive. Denver is a catalyst for change. She is the fourth baby born to Sethe. She went to Lady Jones' house four times on her own. Amy used her hands four times to give Sethe comfort and with that fourth time, pulled Denver from her mother and into this world. With regard to territory and boundaries, she is the 4 in the address of 124 Bluestone. Everyone in the house knows about Beloved now and she becomes Denver's obsession and she becomes real. Being isolated creates a terrible focus and desire for the ghost of the past. The lack of community intensifies the problem. It is only when Denver sees Beloved for what she is, spiteful and out to hurt her mother, that she considers the consequences.

When Sethe accepts that Beloved has returned, everything falls apart. Eventually, Sethe, Beloved, and Denver are sequestered in 124 Bluestone. Sethe has ceased to work, Denver is ostracized, and Beloved has become the focal point of the home. She is the one who receives the food, the clothes, the attention. Beloved grows fat while Sethe and

Denver starve. They are trapped in their home, in the events of the past, and they are unable to move forward without something happening. Denver makes the decision to leave the house and look for help when her mother begins to vomit from not having food. She turns to Lady Jones.

Lady Jones reaches out to the women of the community and sends food to the trio of women. Because Denver puts the needs of her mother in front of her own fears, she changes their fate. The women band together and send them food over the course of the spring and this generosity begins the healing of the community, Sethe's family, and each individual. During this time, the old memories come back and inspire a softening and forgiveness for what occurred all those years ago. Morrison explores how the memories are stored and passed on in the community when Denver brings dishes back to those who left food for her and her mother.

Denver would return a neighbor's dish and a small conversation would take place. All of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. Others remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt. One remembered the tonic mixed there that cured a relative. One showed her the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs' kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the Settlement Fee. They remembered the party where twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry smash. One said she wrapped Denver when she was a single day old and cut shoes to fit her mother's blasted feet. Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly easily they did what they could to trip him up. (293-294)

It is significant that women are the saviors in this event. This is where their power and their identity get formed. All the good experiences at Baby Suggs are called to the fore in order to protect one of their own. Their territory must be defended. The household and



the domestic chores that make up the moments of memories, emotional connections, and a sense of personal and communal identity rescue Denver and her family.

Denver ends up getting work from the Bodwins, the landlords of 124 Bluestone. She must interview for a job, and it is when she does this that the same woman, Janey, who fed her grandmother cornbread and milk when she first arrived, inquires about Sethe. From what Denver tells her, Janey realizes that Sethe is haunted by Beloved. She brings the women of the community together to save Sethe and Denver. They decide to exorcise Beloved. They bring together their spiritual gifts—reminiscent of Baby Suggs—as an inclusionary tactic to claim space. Some are Christian and some bring items of spiritual significance to the meeting at 124 Bluestone. The women “brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both” (303). The women band together and yell at the house in one voice.

The noise brings Sethe and Beloved to the door where she feels as if the Clearing had come to her...where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in the wash. (308)

For a moment she is free. Immediately after this, Mr. Bodwin rides up to pick up Denver for her job at his house. Upon seeing the old white abolitionist man, she has a flashback to when the school teacher came to collect her and her children and she experiences the same sensation of “wings beating” at her mind. The women stop her right before she attempts to stab him with an icepick. Beloved appears on the porch, naked and swollen as if with child. Some say she then disappears. Some say they see her running off into the

woods. Some say they see her footprints by the river. The implications of her disappearance go along with Ruth Van de Akker's assessment that the past must be faced to be overcome. Denver's ability to develop new coping skills happens when she reaches out to the other women and to the woman who educated her when she was very young. This links to the necessity of women teaching others new skills and ways of thinking (293, 298). It shows Denver's ability to reach out to the women who have knowledge to give in order to create her own identity. She defends her psychological borders as well as her bounded physical space. When she does this, it protects not only herself but her mother and their future generations. Sethe and Baby Suggs relied solely on themselves and felt that they were alone in their struggles or they had to lead the way. Denver sees that people are stronger together and how they need one another. While the past still haunts the women, it no longer controls them. The wish that Sethe has for more interaction and teaching from the women is fulfilled for Denver by her act of joining in with her community.

The stories of Baby Suggs and Sethe relate to *Mama Day* regarding the effects of slavery on a family. An intertextual comparison between the major characters in both novels demonstrates how the release from slavery has an immediate effect what happens to the self, the family, and the community over time.

## Chapter Three

### *Mama Day*

In Naylor's *Mama Day*, Miranda, or Mama Day, compares to Morrison's Baby Suggs as the recognized leader of psychological and community territory both literally and figuratively. The novel takes place in the modern age, and unlike Baby Suggs, Mama Day has an established and strong sense of self. Both the African-American Gothic and the Domestic Gothic are apparent in this novel in the rituals Mama Day performs in her home and at the "other place," the original Day family home. Mama Day's magic and healing foods are well known within the confines of Willow Springs. Just as Mama Day's magic connects to the past and her ancestors who passed the knowledge down to her, Mama Day passes the family secrets down to her niece, Ophelia. Her ability to do magic supernaturally connects her to her deceased family members and the original matriarch of the family, a conjure woman named Sapphira Wade. Magic is remembered in the Day family as a tool for overcoming traumatic events in the past and is still used in the present to combat trouble, ill health, defend family and property, or to seek out wisdom. Therefore, the magic used by Mama Day reveals the uncanny within the home and the community. One of the ways Mama Day uses magic is to fight against infertility in women, which directly relates to their role in domestic space. She uses her magic to heal illnesses in her family and her community. Mama Day's magic at the "other place," a paranormally charged home the Day family has owned since the time Sapphira was enslaved, allows her to supernaturally connect to the past, thus creating a sense of Gothic

transgression through extreme acts that violate societal standards. In this case, Mama Day's spiritual abilities violate what society deems real or normal. For Mama Day and her sister, Abigail, the Domestic Gothic is also revealed through food, which is a means of communication and community connection such as the annual Candle Walk that occurs every December. Food is also used to signify the sexualization of men and women, as well as for claiming identity of the self, similar to what occurred between Sethe and Paul D in *Beloved*. Such sexualization and self-realization is shown in interactions between Ophelia and George during their visits to restaurants and at meal times in their home.

The African American family is Othered through the literal location of the land, which is marked by ambiguity. Willow Springs borders the states of Georgia and South Carolina, and the states have "been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other" (Naylor 4-5). This attempt by the states to claim the land is analogous to the claim of slavery on African American people as well as the Willow Springs residents' attempts to claim identities within the borders of a country that would enslave them. Naylor ties the land and the people together physically, socially, and politically and creates a strong psychological territory for her characters. History and memory are vital themes in the novel where the Gothic is seen by replaying the history of slavery in the minds and lives of characters. History and memory are also seen in the domestic rituals the people perform.

In the essay, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: Bridging Roots and Routes," Lamothe writes that the women "preserve their cultural memory through the repetition of material practices that include cooking and weaving and through the transmission of personal and

communal stories” (155). This is certainly applicable to both novels. The novel is written using an ongoing conversation between Mama Day’s great-niece, Ophelia, who is also called Cocoa and Baby Girl, and her deceased husband, George. Each character shares a perspective about the past, which allows the reader to have clarity regarding their lack of communication and understanding during their life together. This fragmentation of the past and the self comes together as Naylor exposes Ophelia’s lack of connection to Willow Springs and the domestic chores she shuns, such as cooking. Naylor also uses the mysterious beginning of the Day family and how there is no clear answer given as to how Sapphira Wade comes into possession of their land nor how she killed her husband to reiterate a fragmented past for the entire family with regard to the land that is a symbolic reference to the family’s origins in Africa. Mama Day’s perspective is also shared in the novel regarding what transpires with the community, the past, and with Ophelia and George. Mama Day, the representative of the family, is a history keeper and has the ability to go to the “other place” and supernaturally connect to the memories of the past. The magical gifts passed down from Sapphira Wade also are used by her to connect to her own self and to benefit to the community. As the history keeper, the matriarch of the family, and the spiritual leader in the community, she provides clarity through her solid, well established identity that she reifies through repetition of domestic chores and family magic.

The Domestic Gothic is revealed through the motif of food in the novel *Mama Day*. The relationship with food is unique to Ophelia regarding her fragmented psychological territory. Ophelia calls people by the names of foods that relate to their skin tone. This is a projection of the conflict she feels within herself regarding her place

within her own race, as well as her own bigotry. Ophelia's light colored skin has been a shame and an embarrassment to her growing up, and she always tries to look darker through tanning or makeup. She hates the fact that she looks white since she is "pure black" (Naylor 48). Her grandmother Abigail and great aunt Miranda gave her the pet name of Cocoa because she was so light that "it would put color on her somewhere" (39-40). In "Personal Names and Identity in Literary Context," Benedicta Wendt-Val states, "Pet names and nicknames are often used as a means to control, manipulate or degrade other people" (Wendt-Val 283). She continues that if a character gains a better understanding of the self, she may decide to begin using her given name as a sign of improved self-worth (283). The character also has the possibility of a distinct "feeling of lost identity" if they are divulged of their pet name or if their life or memories are symbolized by the name (283). Ophelia's beginning, like Denver's, was auspicious--she came out "kicking and screaming," "[a] little raw demon from the start" (39). The family "didn't have much luck with girls in [the] family" due to their early deaths. Ophelia's mother was "drying up her milk with hate" over the missing father and Ophelia "that little ball of pale fire, spitting up practically every ounce of goat's milk she could take," was struggling to survive (39). This passage helps to explain Ophelia's aggressive and persevering personality. Her beginning is a foreshadowing of her tough exterior, but also of the trials of being an African American woman. It is interesting to compare the issue of breast milk to *Beloved* when Ophelia rejects the goat milk as it can be interpreted as a desire to be nursed by her mother rather than bottle fed. The goat is known to be a stubborn animal and Ophelia, born with a fiery personality, seems to personify qualities of the goat's stubbornness. Elizabeth T. Hayes asserts:

The named—whether person, place, or object—is identified or marked by the namer as distinctive, unique, the occupant of a discrete space in the universe. To name is also to claim dominion: naming children, slaves, domestic animals, or real estate is an announcement of figurative if not literal, ownership of the named as well as indication of the namer’s relationship to or sentiments about the named. (669)

I contend her identity crisis is reiterated by her pet name. The fact it is given to her by family, with the wish it would add color, highlights her differences and further separates her from those who are darker skinned. She is othered by her name and her identity is fractured due to the conflict of not fitting in with her race. Ophelia was teased at school that she had “white blood...she wanted red blood like everyone else” and she nearly cut “off her middle finger with a butcher knife, fearing she really had white blood” (47). The act of being bullied by people of her own race speaks to the fragmentation of the community as a whole and to the effect that racism has on everyone. Ophelia hates “to think about the fact that [she] might be carrying a bit of’ Bascomb Wade in her veins, the husband and slaver owner of Sapphira Wade (219). This highlights the struggle of African Americans who are victims of racism regarding the historical issue of miscegenation and the troubles and stigma that came with being of mixed blood during the time of slavery.

Ophelia’s chaotic time in New York City, which functions as a modern trope for the Gothic jungle, is symbolic of her being lost in a fragmented sense of self. When Ophelia and George first see one another they are in a diner. The diner, an archetypal kitchen, takes on proportions of the grotesque and uncanny with regard to the food served. The diner contains gross misrepresentations of items that are used for things other than they are made for. The first object Ophelia remarks on is that George is “picking his teeth with plastic straw [that] wasn’t really a plastic straw, it was a coffee stirrer” (Naylor

13). The coffee “didn’t qualify as coffee.” “Everything about those types of places was a little more or less than they should have been” (13). The misrepresentation can be interpreted to relate to Ophelia’s identity crisis, as well as human nature and how people portray themselves. People aren’t always what they seem; just like Ophelia looks light, but she is black. Ophelia remarks that she “was always thrown off balance” by these diners. The place where she eats is a representation of the kitchen, which is not inside the home and further distances her from a clear sense of the self. Hayes refers to Sigmund Freud’s “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” regarding his theory of how rooms become a symbol of women due to the relation to the womb as well as “the place assigned for [women’s] occupation” (670). In saying that, Hayes considers the patriarchal viewpoint as part of the doctrine of separate spheres that is the basis for the “cult of domesticity” (670). Referring to Allene Nichol’s article regarding the routine of cooking, Ophelia is breaking the stereotypical gender role of the female not only because she is single, but because she is dining out versus being married and cooking her own meal. Instead, the meal she eats needs to be “under two dollars” because she is without a job, distancing her from any sort of comfort (Naylor 15). The “always red vinyl” seats flavor the food. The diner and displays are unnatural in their appearance because they are “too clean” and the “cakes and pies inside of them never made crumbs when they are cut, and no juice ever dripped from the cantaloupes and honeydews” (13). The “warm pistachio ice cream...[is] solid as a rock” (13). These examples of food are unrealistic and unappetizing. They have taken on a sense of the *Unheimliche* in the way there is a component of strange in the familiar. The food has a grotesque element that represents how Ophelia feels about her fragmented self since she is not what she appears to be in



looks and behavior. Additionally, because she is breaking the gender mold and having to make do with less food, it could be interpreted as the subjugation, and perhaps punishment, of a female who does not follow society's standards. The kitchen, known for its ability to make one feel comfortable, becomes foreign and feels dirty. The "too clean displays" lead to "greasy thumbprints" on the back of a receipt and "lumped up" pea soup (13-14). There is a difference between the quality of food she can get versus George's food. The food she has available to her, a salad and some herbed tea, is light and will leave her wanting in comparison to George's substantial pea soup and roast beef (14-15). George, because he is employed, and I would posit, male, can afford a sturdier, more nutritious meal. She notices that he eats with "a certain ease and decisiveness that spelled *employed* with each forkful of their stringy roast beef" (14). The salad and tea become symbolic of several things: the lightness of the meal symbolizes her skin tone, her lack of employment and steady finances, and her oppression as a single woman bucking society's accepted stereotypes. Ophelia is abrasive, defensive, and according to Mama Day, spoiled, and these qualities are highlighted through her interaction with others.

Ophelia is the aggressor in her sexual independence as she details how she picks up men in restaurants by offering them "mint-flavored toothpicks" (16). She considers offering one to George as she compares the way he eats to what type of lover he might be. In the following passage, her observations regarding George's physical attributes sound like the type of inspection a slave owner would perform prior to purchasing someone. In Teresa Goddu's book, "Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation," she posits that female Gothic is related to the public sphere of the nineteenth century American market place" (94). She states that when the "boundaries between public and

private spheres” dissipate, the female gothic reveals how the female is trapped in the patriarchal society as well as highlight how the female body becomes the new “commodity culture” (94). Goddu believes that the female Gothic has as much to do with gender as commerce. Goddu states, “As the “abject object of the telling,” the gothic heroine embodies the very thing she is supposed to hide: the marketplace” (94). In the following passage, Ophelia dehumanizes George through a sexual objectification that resembles the slave auction as she observes in him the diner.

I'd met quite a few guys in restaurants with my box of toothpicks; it was a foolproof way to start up a conversation once I'd checked out what they ordered and how they ate it. The way a man chews can tell you loads about the kind of lover he'll turn out to be. Don't laugh—meat is meat. And you had given those three slabs of roast beef a consideration they didn't deserve, so I actually played with the idea that you might be worth the pain of forcing on my shoes. You had nice teeth and strong, blunt fingers and your nails were clean, but thank God, not manicured. (Naylor 16)

Because African American slaves were viewed as animals and not human, the critique of physical attributes in this manner highlights how the past haunts the present. Ophelia callously observes George's behavior and makes a judgment based on what he looks like. Her own obsession with the surface changes how she looks at others as well. She is crude in her explanation of the sexual innuendo behind the way he eats. Ophelia takes note of the quality and strength of George's teeth and hands, much like what would happen on an auction block with slaves and a potential master. It is reminiscent, as well, of how one judges horses using hands or looking at the teeth and hooves to check for health and quality before purchasing. In consideration of Nichol's theories of food and sex, Ophelia is setting herself up to eventually become intimate with George. This scene contrasts to the sexual encounter between Paul D and Sethe in that Sethe is in a role of cathartic emotional submission and they are in the home and Paul D is the one to make the

advance on Sethe. Sethe's sexual aggression equals Paul D's in that she becomes his lover on the first day they reunite, but this does not occur with George and Ophelia. In fact, Ophelia is the one who is in the place of submission in the office when she interviews for a job later that day. Whereas Sethe's domestic chores and the work she does at the restaurant are related to her former duties as a slave, it can be argued that the work one does in an office is comparable to being a modern-day slave. Ophelia compares her attempt to get a job to a "cattle call" and that she was part of a "herd" that was "slotted between one and three" (15). As an educated woman with years of work experience at one location, she considers herself independent and adept at taking care of herself. Ophelia is not known by her family for being particularly capable in the kitchen and eating in a restaurant is part of that identity and the separation she experiences when she leaves Willow Springs. Her family does not value her work in the business world, causing another layer of psychological friction for Ophelia.

Contrary to Ophelia's experience in New York, Mama Day and Abigail are always cooking and the food they cook is sweet, rich, wholesome, and comforting. This contrast highlights the fragmentation of the experience of home versus being in the Gothic jungle of the city. Similar to Baby Suggs preparing food to celebrate the arrival of Sethe, Abigail and Mama Day cook for Ophelia when she comes home to visit. Because Mama Day has the gift of "second sight," she is forewarned that Ophelia will return early when the "bead of water" that has accumulated from the steam of a kettle "turns golden in color" as a sign of her arrival (14, 34). The sisters make apple cakes, coconut cakes; Abigail wants some "rosemary" from "the other place to season [the] pork shoulder" (37). Miranda and Abigail want to "fatten her up" during the time she is at home (37).

The abundance of food is representative of the two mother figures' adoration for Ophelia, taking on the mirrored allusion to the Prodigal Son. Additionally, the food takes on a different connotation at Willow Springs because Ophelia is home and is no longer lost, but feels "whole" (176). No longer is the food grotesque or showing signs of the uncanny like it did in New York City and the diner. Instead, the Domestic Gothic is highlighted by the ritualistic nature of the cooking and how Abigail and Mama Day rely on foods cooked in the home and ingredients from the "other place." Ophelia is doted on by Abigail and Mama Day though they play different roles in her life. Mama Day is the disciplinarian and Abigail is the nurturer; "together they were the perfect mother" (58). They are a doubling of the mother figure. Abigail is her grandmother and Mama Day is her aunt, with Ophelia's own mother passing away. However, they have raised her, filling gaps left by her absent parents, which created another fracture in her psyche.

One of the things Mama Day is known for is her ability to heal, and she is often asked to assist with problems that modern medicine cannot cure. The magic that Mama Day uses involves Gothic transgression regarding birth and being a mother that relates to the home. For Bernice, being a mother is deeply connected to her own identity and her vision of her role as a housewife. Bernice, a nervous character who believes she is infertile, comes to Mama Day asking for help to conceive a baby. She is impatient because the "star grass" and "teas" aren't working as fast as she thinks they should (43). Mama Day urges her to "give it time," but Bernice reminds her that there is a "new moon tonight" and would like to go to "the other place" (43). Mama Day acknowledges the phase of the moon, but goes into her house. Breaking eggs, she observes the yolks remarking, "not this month...nor the next" (43-44). This passage gives the reader the

opportunity to see Mama Day using herbal teas grown and gathered from her land and to see her conjure spells in order to determine Bernice's chance of fertility. Bernice steals fertility pills from the conventional doctor in town and they make her ill. This results in Mama Day having to heal her with natural cures (72-88). The fact the conventional medicine makes her worse is an exclusionary aspect of the text that rejects contemporary lifestyles outside of Willow Springs. They eventually end up at the other place where a fertility ritual is performed to help Bernice get pregnant. This is an explicit example of Gothic transgression where Mama Day, who has sworn Bernice to secrecy about what occurs, uses her knowledge of magic to help Bernice "believe that there's something more than there is" (139). In this way, Mama Day's personal understanding that the mind is the most important thing comes into the narrative. Mama Day believes that "she wasn't changing the natural course of nothing, she couldn't if she tried" and she is "just using what's there" (139). Bernice's belief in the old magic is vital and Mama Day believes that what will be has already been decided. Using tropes of darkness and the forest, Bernice makes her way through the woods to the "other place" where Mama Day waits for her on the front porch.

Moving through the bush, guided by the starlight that glints off the two pair of eyes waiting and rocking, both unblinking. One pair cradled low in the lap of the other, soft rumbles vibrating its feathered throat. One pair humming a music born before words as they rock and stroke, forefinger and thumb, gently following the path of feathers, throat, breasts, sides. The right hand stroking, the left hand cupping underneath the tiny egg hole that sucks itself open and closed, open and closed...She can taste the fear that hesitates on the edge of the garden walk...Feet passing into the other place where flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly...the tiny hole sucking itself open and closed, open and closed. The left hand reaches back out. Knowing takes the egg while the shell's still pulsing and wet, breaks it, and eats. (139)

The setting of the “other place” is heightened by the darkness and fear that Bernice feels. Mama Day is holding a laying hen linking nature to the supernatural event as well as to the domestic since she raises the hens herself. Hens are commonly used in Hoodoo magic for good and bad charms. Mama Day strokes the bird to soothe it and to coax an egg from the bird. The text denotes her synchronicity with the animal as both of them stare unblinking as well as singing a song that “is born before words” inferring that Mama Day has a timeless connection to the spirit world and nature. The underlying message is that there is no separation between the spirit and nature. The passage also explores the human boundary between the spirit world, as Bernice crosses the territory of the woods to the “other place” that allows for singing flowers and flying trees. A sexual innuendo is created through the imagery of Mama Day caressing the hen’s “feathers, throat, breasts, sides,” which could be seen as a way to imitate foreplay. The egg is produced and Bernice eats the egg to show her submission to the ritual that will occur as well as to prepare her for what is coming. By eating the raw egg, she connects herself to the hen, a symbol of fertility and nature.

As the ritual continues, the two women move into the old house. Because Bernice eats the egg, she is granted entrance into the house that represents a consecrated shrine where a sacrifice or a spiritual journey will take place. Mama Day has set up a bed on the dining room table for Bernice to lie down where “she strips down naked, rests her head on the embroidered pillow, and props her feet high up into the scooped top of each board” (140). The dining room table speaks to the domestic nature of the ritual and is an appropriate place to perform the ritual, as it is symbolic of what Bernice is asking for—a family to fill the chairs. Bernice eats the raw egg as an offering symbolizing a request for

her own female ova to be receptive to fertilization. The embroidered pillow becomes a representation of the domestic side of the home. The act of sewing is traditionally a function of the wife or mother. In her longing and anticipation of a baby, Bernice crochets baby outfits that are kept in a completed nursery for her future offspring. Bernice has stockpiled “hand-stitched jumpers, crocheted blankets, sweaters, and booties” (83). The embroidered pillow reflects the promise of domestic duties in which she will claim her psychological and familial territory as a parent.

Bernice is able to go through the magical event by convincing herself by saying “it was all a dream” (140). Bernice’s experience becomes so intense that she begins to sense that

She ain’t flesh, she’s a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in ...the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The unaccountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. Pulsing and alive—wet—the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight (140)

As Mama Day aids the process of the egg moving from the hen into Bernice, it is symbolic of a covenant between Bernice and the spirit world. The joining of the hen’s egg and her body is reflective of a symbiotic relationship between nature, the spirit realm, and the human world. It is a union representing sexual intercourse that leads to her eventual pregnancy. The passage is rife with imagery of one who is submitting to the unknown. Mama Day would consider it “something greater than herself.” Bernice also attempts to manipulate her own human body and what it is capable of performing. The magic ritual is a transgression that goes against societal norms regarding motherhood and the home. It is also a transgression with regard to a taboo aspect of the Gothic: simulated bestiality. The “other place” becomes the site of the uncanny in comparison to a home

within the boundaries of Willow Springs. The spiritual connection becomes more realistic in the “other place,” which adds another layer to the uncanny in the home.

Mama Day’s healing prowess is linked to her ability to connect to the person she is healing and with nature and spirit. Paula Gallant Eckard writes in “The Prismatic Past in *Oral History and Mama Day*,” Mama Day’s powers “emanate from the deep recesses of the mind and perhaps from more ancient sources of power...She uses her powers responsibly and with restraint” (Eckard 130). Donald J. Reilly, contributor to the book *Moments in Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literature*, writes that the other place is “the source of Mama Day’s powers and this is one of the spaces in which the gothicism and magical realism meet directly” (Reilly 244). Connecting the idea that Mama Day’s strength lies in her mind, he proposes that Mama Day’s “powers emanate logically and seamlessly out of the context of the scene” because her magic “is just a fact of life in Willow Springs” (245). Using Sack’s theory that territories must be guarded and cared for, Mama Day’s territory is that of the mind. The Gothic is also seen in relation to the occult nature of her power.

Mama Day uses her magic to defend her family after Ophelia is targeted by a character named Ruby. Ruby poisons Ophelia in an act of jealousy over her lover, Junior Lee, as she suspects him of cheating with Ophelia. Ruby, who has braided Ophelia’s hair since she was a child, uses the domestic family ritual as the means to try to kill Ophelia. The braiding is related to the African American culture and it is significant that the poison is applied by someone in the community and a family friend. As Ruby braids and “massages the warm solution down its length,” Ophelia relaxes and

[t]wenty years melted away under her fingers as she sectioned and braided my hair...Tight braids. So tight they pinched my scalp up along the temples and



nape...And my palm coming up for those loose strands of hair. A ball of hair to be burned when we were through. A bird will take it and make a nest; —you'll have headaches all your life. All unspoken and by rote. I felt a void when she was done. (Naylor 246)

The braids, reminiscent of chains of slavery, are tight and painful as they poison Ophelia.

Ruby even uses “white twine” and weaves it throughout the venomous strands (246).

Ophelia remembers an old wives’ tale that has been passed down during the process regarding the need to burn the hair. This passage is deeply layered with symbolism that is important to the way women interact and pass down rituals. The wives’ tales told by the older generations cement these memories and relationships that continue. In the same vein, harmful recollections from the past are woven into the communal memories that are told and retold through behaviors and habits. Ruby symbolizes multiple roles. She is the person within the Willow Springs community who disavows her black heritage by using it for evil; she is the shadow of slavery that is repeated in daily lives through the symbolic use of white twine; and she is the voice of Ophelia’s fragmented self that haunts her.

Ruby’s use of black magic on one of her own is an underlying message that I contend relates to how acceptance of the self, in Ophelia’s case, must be about the healing of her fragmented identity. Ophelia asks Ruby for a mirror to see her braids and she says, “There ain’t none inside worth using, but go on home and see how pretty it is” (246).

Ophelia’s request to go inside her house and look into a mirror reflects several different meanings. First, in relation to Ruby, the house represents the self and what Ruby sees in the mirrors is without worth. Ruby’s own fractured sense of self shows in her action to harm Ophelia. Secondly, Ophelia won’t actually see herself out of her own sphere of home. Therefore, looking through someone else to see your own self-worth is useless.

Third, the second part of her comment, “Go home and see how pretty it is,” is a

foreshadowing truth. If one is secure in their own psychological territory, what they see in the mirror, will be “pretty” and not horrifying. Ruby’s poison brings out the grotesque when Ophelia looks at herself in her own mirror.

The fragmentation of the self takes on dimensions of horror as Ophelia, who becomes deathly ill, peers into a cracked mirror and begins to put on “a touch of makeup...until [she is] truly better” (275). The use of makeup ties back to her attempts to make herself look darker. The darkness is revealed from inside the mind when Ophelia remembers, “I put a dab of powdered rouge on the brush, and when I stroked upward on my cheekbone my flesh gummed on the brush bristles and got pushed up like molten caramel” (275). The images become more and more horrific until Ophelia’s “eyes, lips, chin, forehead, and ears had been smeared everywhere, mashed in and wrinkled with some gouged places still holding the imprints from my fingers” (276). Abigail comes in and tells her “it’s all in [her] mind,” which is a continued theme throughout the novel (276). The grotesque images seen in the mirror of her childhood home reflect Ophelia’s lack of security in who she is as a woman, the way she does not fit in with regard to her light appearance, and her resistance to acceptance of the rituals of Willow Springs. The mind becomes poisoned with the braids symbolically wrapped around her head. Abigail’s reminder that it is all in her mind is her deepest thought about herself—her own fragile psychological territory. Reilly contends that Ophelia is being forced to face the “abyss of her racial identity; the monstrous version of herself that is reflected back embodies the deep insecurities she feels about her color and her body” (Reilly 250). Cedric Gael Bryant in his essay, *"The Soul has Bandaged Moments": Reading the African American Gothic in Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," Morrison's *Beloved*, and Gomez's Gilda*

Stories,” posits that the African American Gothic is revealed through moments like this one as it relates to Lacan’s mirror stage in which

the mirror stage marks the crucial period when the individual's nascent sense of self is "mirrored" or oriented in the intimidating presence of another who, in turn, elicits aggressive reactions of self-preservation in the self. Consequently, this period is one of intense anxiety in which the individual develops against the potentially dominating influence, or gaze, of powerful "others." (542)

Reilly references Bryant’s essay and uses his interpretation to inform Ophelia’s situation.

Reilly ascribes it to Bryant’s epigram by Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous quote from

*Beyond Good and Evil*: “When you go out looking for monsters, take care that you do not become one. And when you look into the abyss, remember the abyss looks back at you”

(Reilly 249). This abyss is what Ophelia and Mama Day must face.

In response to Ophelia’s poisoning, Mama Day uses her conjuring magic to exact justice. She circles Ruby’s house, hitting the sides with her father’s cane and throwing out silvery powder. Lightning hits Ruby’s house twice and it explodes, leaving no doubt that it was brought down by Mama Day (Naylor 273). Mama Day meets up with Dr. Buzzard, and he says, “I just didn’t figure Ruby was crazy enough to mess with what was yours” (270-271). His comment relates to the expectation that Mama Day will defend her territory with violence if necessary. Additionally, Mama Day destroys Ruby’s home, which is symbolic of her physical and psychological territory. Mama Day’s focus on caring for the home, creating a comfortable environment, and claiming the territory is part of her character and has been her life’s work. For her to utterly destroy the home and everyone inside shows how far she is willing to go to protect her own territory. In comparing Sethe to Mama Day, Sethe, while wrong, is guided by a desire to protect just as Mama Day is. Sethe is led by her heart and is clearly not in control of her mental

faculties. Conversely, Mama Day is methodical and plans her revenge with deadly accuracy. Sethe's violence is turned towards her own in an effort to enact an exclusionary tactic on those who would enslave her or her children. Mama Day's tactics are purely exclusionary. Reilly observes that one of the traits that Mama Day inherited from Sapphira is "resistant and [a] subversive personality" (Reilly 245). Mama Day destroys Ruby's entire home when she had the opportunity to be less obvious. Her intention is to make an example of Ruby, a member of the Willow Springs community and a conjure woman herself. Ruby embodies the presence of the slave master who would commodify African American people. Ruby uses her power for evil and attempts to manipulate others versus helping them. Mama Day's revenge for Ophelia is symbolic of protecting the family and African American community from those who would encroach on the psychological identity that has been staked and claimed through time and hard work.

In an effort to counteract the spell put on Ophelia, Mama Day goes to the "other place" in what resembles a symbolic quest and has an otherworldly experience. While she is there, a hurricane hits Willow Springs and destroys the bridge, the community's only link to civilization. The hurricane employs the metonymies of howling wind and blowing rain that signify a sense of doom, mystery, or the supernatural. Mama Day induces herself into a trance like state. While in this trance, she is transported through the past to where she meets the original conjure woman-mother, Sapphira Wade. She goes through "door upon door upon door" of the past and at each point Mama Day says, "Tell me your name" as she meets her history, her family, the crushing weight of a people's horror and pain (Naylor 283). Finally, she hears the word

Daughter. The word comes to cradle what has gone past weariness. She can't really hear it 'cause she's got no ears, or call out 'cause she's got no mouth.

There's only the sense of being. Daughter. Flooding like fine streams of hot, liquid sugar to fill the spaces where there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers. Miranda. Sister. Little Mama. Mama Day. Melting, melting away under the sweet flood waters pouring down to lay bare a place she ain't known existed: Daughter. And she opens the mouth that ain't there to suckle at full breasts, deep greedy swallows of a thickness like cream, seeping from the corners of her lips, spilling onto her chin. Full. Full and warm to rest between the mounds of softness, to feel the beating of a calm and steady heart. She sleeps within her sleep. (283)

This passage beautifully illustrates the formation of psychological identity and the importance of facing the past for healing. The Gothic narrative allows for the expression of the past to enter and heal the hurts of the present. There is a sense of the primal in the description of Mama Day's experience with just "being." In a similar style as Baby Suggs at The Clearing, Mama Day is called out and named with each moniker she has used in her lifetime, and the hurts that she experienced as a child because there were "no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on," is recognized, validated, and healed with sweet redemption. This is also a comparable moment that Bernice experiences in which she feels that "she ain't flesh" and is one with the spirit (140). Mama Day's mother went insane and later committed suicide when her daughter, Peace, died. Mama Day was left as a young girl caring for her sister and ailing mother; she never married and never had children, but has been everybody's Mama on the island. Naylor utilizes the image of returning to the womb and being reborn and nursed to emphasize the need to heal the inner child and the losses she experienced. Returning to the images of breastfeeding and the importance of that bonding, Mama Day suckles at the breasts of the original (M)other and in contentment—rests. This brings the theme of breastmilk and breastfeeding full circle in this paper as each major female character has had an experience with the primal need to connect to or experience, mother's milk. The

heartbeat signifies the connection to the Mother and community as well as the emotional healing. The message she receives to help the ailing Ophelia is to face the pain of the past, which is symbolized at the well where her sister, Peace, died. The Other Place, the ultimate example of a Domestic Gothic setting, supplies the environment for the painful history and past to be revealed, as well as the answer to helping heal the fractured Ophelia. In this case, her husband, George is being asked to do something he does not believe in and for his resistance, he dies in the struggle to finish his quest to be connected to the African American community. In the end, Ophelia is healed and moves forward with her life, eventually marrying a southern black man and having two sons. This marriage signifies her acceptance of the past and her place within it.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

The women of *Beloved* and *Mama Day* endure many trials and heartbreaks over the course of the novels and their stories resonate with the Gothic due to the gruesome truth of their tales. *Beloved* is based off a true story of Margaret Garner who drowned her children in order to save them from the horrors of slavery. The use of the Domestic Gothic and African American Gothic as vehicles to understand both novels opens up the discussion of the subjugation and commodification of women as well as the importance of the home. The need for community oneness is highlighted as well through the combination of both sub-genres. The lack of parental continuity is an important underlying message within the texts revealing how this situation leaves a gaping wound in the life of the novels' major characters. This applies not only to the literature, but to reality. All readers are implicated in some way and become invested in these human stories rich with their own history.

A significant difference between *Mama Day* and *Baby Suggs* is the importance they place on psychological territory. *Baby Suggs* focuses on the state of the heart. *Mama Day* focuses on the state of her mind. In the end, *Baby Suggs*, who told her people to "love your heart. For this is the prize," ended up saying before her death, "Those white

things have taken all I had or dreamed...and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (Morrison 104-105). Mama Day believes that “the mind is everything” (Naylor 90). In comparing these two identities, Baby Suggs is influenced by her feelings while Mama Day leans more on understanding and in control of feeling. It could be argued that more mature, experienced adults gain the ability to use their mind to rationalize thoughts and feelings while people with less experience may be led by pure emotion. For Baby Suggs, it was her first opportunity to allow herself to feel, which explains why the heart takes priority in her identity. Mama Day is so deeply rooted to her land, family, and history that the territory itself has become her identity. Her statement “the mind is everything” could be determined to mean that her psychological territory is everything. The truth may lie somewhere in between.



## End Notes

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## Biosketch

Lori Cook was born in Waco, Texas over the Brazos River in the backseat of her parents' car on a dark, cold and windy night. Her parents love to tell the tale of her birth and she believes this was the beginning of her love of stories and Gothic dramas. Lori attended Riesel High School and married her high school sweetheart, Stephen Cook. They have been married twenty-six years and have three children along with their spouses: Stephanie Aguirre and her husband, Miguel Aguirre, Lauren Cook, and Samuel Cook and his wife, Katlyn Owens. Lori is grandmother to two precious daughters of Samuel and Katlyn: Emarie and Charlotte. Lori received her Bachelors and Masters of English from the University of Texas at Tyler.