Toni Morrison, Black Agrarianism, and the Naturalist Tradition: The Earth's Role in Healing from Historical Trauma

By: Siena Palese

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Advisor: Prof. Eric Gidal

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Introduction

There is no place more powerful than the earth itself, and the land it provides shapes and forms the individual and cultural identities of every human on the planet. For African Americans, the earth bears great trauma, alongside the potential for transformative healing. King et. al., authors of *Black Agrarianism: The Significance of Land Ownership in the Rural South* recognize that "since the end of slavery, land has continued to operate as a site of racialized exclusion…At the same time, Black farmland owners articulate an ethos in which land is a source of freedom, pride, and belonging."[1] Similarly, Leah Penniman founder of Soul Fire Farm and author of *Black Earth Wisdom* asserts that the "land was the scene of the crime, she was never the criminal. Part of the work of healing our relationship with soil is unearthing and relearning the lessons of land reverence and agrarian innovation from the past."[2] This dual nature of the land, as both a site of historical injustice and a source of empowerment, establishes a distinctive relationship for African Americans. American novelist Toni Morrison possesses a unique ability to discern the environmental attributes within this land, preserving it as a place of significant importance in the African American community. Through her character's relationships and journeys with the land, Morrison invites her audience to contemplate, acknowledge, and undergo a healing process of their own, recognizing the complexity and resilience inherent in the African-American connection to the land.

Toni Morrison was the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, the Pulitzer, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and is described by *The New York Times* as "one

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[1]Quisumbing King, Katrina, et al. "Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South." *Rural Sociology*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2018. 677

[2] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 118

of the finest writers to craft narrative in the English language."[3] Her works vocalize themes of cultural heritage, spirituality, and the profound connection between individuals and the earth. Her literary platform has been "transformative in its writing and rewriting of black life, its history, and future."[4] Morrison derives her distinction from a unique exploration of cultural identity, historical trauma, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world.

In Morrison's seminal works; The *Bluest Eye, Beloved, Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, the earth acts as a conduit for the expression of historical trauma but also as a transformative agent in the healing narrative. This thesis endeavors to uncover the layers of cultural significance embedded in Morrison's exploration of agrarian and wilderness traditions by synthesizing perspectives from contemporary environmental authors, critical race theory, eco-criticism, and trauma studies. Furthermore, it examines the way that the African American trauma and healing narrative is impacted by the contemporary increase in environmental destruction at the hands of industrialization.

Morrison's literary corpus, particularly her four most prominent novels—*The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Sula,* and *Song of Solomon*, offer insights into the African American relationship with the land in the context of historical trauma. Morrison's novel *Beloved* follows the protagonist Sethe, who was born into slavery, suffered its abuse, and subsequently escaped with her children, thus painting an intimate illustration of the direct source of historical trauma. Morrison's literary genius is made evident by her interweaving of African American narratives with the earth, which whether her book directly portrays slavery or not, always relates back to familial or historical trauma. Her novel *Song of Solomon* takes place nearly a century after the official end of slavery

[3] Chambers, Veronica. "The Essential Toni Morrison." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Feb. 2021, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/books/best-toni-morrison-books.html.
[4] Kelley. "The Core Curriculum." *Columbia College*, www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/toni-morrison#:~:text=In%201993%2C%20Morrison%20became%20the,life%2C%20its%20history%20and%20future.

in the United States, however, many of the characters, namely Guitar Baines, still suffer from the historical trauma and racial subjugation that remain ingrained in America's culture years following the termination of slavery. *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* each focus on two towns in Ohio, Medallian in *Sula*, and Lorain in *The Bluest Eye*, in which each African American protagonists suffer because of the poor community foundations due to racial oppression.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), a foundational framework in this study, provides a lens through which the social injustices within Toni Morrison's literature can be explored. CRT posits that racial disparities are not accidental but deeply ingrained in societal structures. In Morrison's narratives, CRT unveils systemic racism, allowing for an understanding of the African American experience and its intersections with the natural world. CRT allows us to examine Morrison's narratives and illuminate how characters negotiate their identities in a racially charged environment. Through the CRT lens, the exploration of agrarian and naturalist traditions demonstrates how racial dynamics impact environmental spaces. By intertwining CRT with eco-criticism and trauma studies, it provides a comprehensive framework to analyze the profound impact of systemic racism on individuals, communities, and their relationship with the environment.

Though enduring vastly different struggles based on community, time period, and gender, each of Morrison's characters bears trauma, and each of those individual traumas can be linked back to the historical trauma that resulted from slavery. Therefore, studies on historical trauma can demonstrate how the earth heals this trauma and how systematic racism, trauma, and the environment are intertwined. Within Morrison's works, trauma studies reveal the enduring psychological effects of slavery and systemic oppression, illustrating how characters grapple with the pressures of collective suffering. The use of trauma studies facilitates the understanding

of Morrison's portrayal of resilience, coping mechanisms, and the intricate ways in which trauma intersects with cultural identity and the natural environment. Trauma studies demonstrate the implications of historical trauma and examine the ways that one may return to nature to heal within Morrison's narratives. By examining how characters confront, navigate, and transcend trauma, Morrison's literature allows for an understanding of resilience, communal healing, and the reclamation of cultural identity.

As Anissa Jeanine Wardi, author of T*oni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color* writes,

> "Ecocritical discourse has historically privileged and romanticized the natural world and set it apart from social landscapes. Such a bifurcation of the human from the nonhuman refuses to recognize the layered, nuanced, and fraught relationship that exists between people of color and the natural world. The fusion of history onto the natural world is the very bedrock of African American ecocritical thought"[5].

Expanding on this idea, it is crucial to recognize the earth as a natural and vital component of African American literature. The complex historical relationship between African Americans and the environment should always be considered, especially in discussions involving Critical Race Theory and trauma studies. By doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of African American literary works emerges, one that encompasses the interplay between cultural history, trauma, and the environment. This integrated approach helps bridge the gap between ecocriticism and African American literature, acknowledging the interconnectedness of human experiences with the natural world within this literary tradition.

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[5] Wardi, Anissa Janine. *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color*. University Press of Mississippi, 2021. 5.

The emphasis on the natural world within Morrison's work positions her as an important figure in a long narrative tradition of American literary naturalism, a tradition celebrated by American naturalist Henry David Thoreau in the nineteenth century, and perpetuated by contemporary environmental authors. In the "Bean-Field" chapter of his book *Walden,* Thoreau asserted that "The earth ... has a certain magnetism in it, by which it attracts the salt, power, or virtue (call it either) which gives it life, and is the logic of all the labor and stir we keep about it, to sustain us"[6]. Perhaps it is this magnetism that urges humans to claim it, work it, adore it, and destroy it. Many authors, inspired by Thoreau's naturalist ethos, have followed his ideas, crafting narratives that explore humanity's intimate relationship with the natural world. Contemporary environmental literature, represented by authors such as bell hooks, Wendell Berry, and Leah Penniman, not only builds upon Thoreau's foundational ideas but extends them into black agrarianism.

Wendell Berry, American environmentalist and author of *The Unsettling of America,* encapsulates the essence of both black agrarianism and American naturalism in his philosophy that "what we do to the land, we do to ourselves"[7], illuminating the interconnection between land stewardship and human well-being. Consequently, the historical struggles of African Americans, for whom land ownership, economic autonomy, and cultural resilience have been arenas fraught with obstacles. For African Americans, the connection between land stewardship and human well-being is not merely philosophical but existential. Thus, there is an inseparable bond between the land and the survival, dignity, and identity of its stewards. Berry's quote extends Thoreau's naturalist idea that characters in naturalist novels are shaped and influenced by their surroundings and that their fates are intertwined with that of the land. Berry's idea about the

[6] Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2019. Chapter 7, "The Bean-Field".
[7] Berry, Wendell. *Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. Counterpoint, 2015.

interconnectivity of the land and human well-being extends beyond literature to assert that human actions towards the land have consequences on physical, psychological, and spiritual health. For African Americans, land is not just a means of sustenance, but also an opportunity for economic empowerment and social justice.

African American environmentalist authors like bell hooks and Leah Penniman assert that the land is deeply intertwined with their own dignity and autonomy. In an interview with *The Sun Magazine*, Leah Penniman discusses her reasoning for captioning a photo "To free ourselves, we must feed ourselves," stating that "When we have land, we can create businesses, build homes, grow food, and so on. Independence and agency come with land."[8] This act of self-reliance ensures access to nutritious food but also strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of collective empowerment. Penniman's perspective aligns with broader movements for land justice and reparations which address historical injustices and inequalities in land ownership. By advocating for land access, Penniman aims to rectify centuries of dispossession and disenfranchisement. Through her interviews and books, Penniman assists her audience in creating pathways for marginalized communities to reclaim their ancestral lands and exercise their own self-agency. bell hooks, an African American social critic and environmental author expands on Penniman's idea in her book *belonging: A Culture of Place*, acknowledging that "living close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit of wonder and reverence for life. Growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life-affirming"[9]. Despite facing systemic oppression, African American communities have forged enduring bonds with the land, drawing sustenance, solace, and inspiration from it. In cultivating this relationship, they have not only

[8] "To Free Ourselves, We Must Feed Ourselves: By Tracy Frisch: Issue 523." *The Sun Magazine*, www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/523/to-free-ourselves-we-must-feed-ourselves. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.
[9] Hooks, Bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 36.

sustained themselves but also created a spiritual sense of belonging to a place, thus finding affirmation and security in their connection to the earth. By embracing a culture rooted in reverence for life and a deep appreciation for the earth, black individuals affirm their intrinsic connection to the natural world and assert their agency in shaping a more sustainable and equitable future.

In conversation with Berry, hooks reiterates that Berry was "one of the first thinkers to insist that we cannot have health in mind, body, and spirit if we do not have health in relationship to the land,"[10] challenging the prevailing norms of industrialization that distance people from a deeper connection with nature. This perspective is particularly significant when considering the therapeutic potential of the land for those suffering from historical trauma, emphasizing the role of nature in healing. hooks acknowledges that [Berry is] "one of the few elder white male writers who has consistently linked the persistence of racism to the destruction of land and people reminding us we cannot have a world of great environmentalism while we maintain the violence of white supremacy and racism"[11]. By recognizing the link between the persistence of racism and the destruction of land and communities, Berry challenges the notion of environmentalism divorced from considerations of racial equity and systemic oppression. This recognition is pivotal in advancing the understanding of environmental justice and healing, emphasizing the imperative of dismantling white supremacy to achieve a truly sustainable and equitable earth.

Morrison, too, weaves narratives where the earth emerges as both a repository of historical trauma and a transformative agent in the healing process. Through images of the earth, Morrison delicately captures the complex relationship between African Americans, the healing narrative, and the land. At the heart of Morrison's work, the earth is figured as earth as a place

[10] Hooks, Bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 186.
[11] ibid.

where people seek sustenance, healing, and self-fulfillment. In Morrison's portrayal of the earth's centrality in the lives of her characters, her literary ideology aligns with Thoreau's observation about human's inherent attraction to the earth, and thus, her work is included in the naturalist literary tradition.

Alongside the naturalist tradition, the agrarian tradition also dominates not only Morrison's narrative but that of many African American authors. Agrarianism is defined as a "perspective that stresses the primacy of family farming, widespread property ownership, and political decentralization. Agrarian ideas are typically justified in terms of how they serve to cultivate moral character and to develop a full and responsible person"[12]. This is a recurring theme throughout Morrison's work, as all of her characters have direct or indirect ties to farming and agricultural pursuits. Agrarianism in the broader context also plays an integral role in African American history and culture. The term "Black agrarianism" refers to the cultivation of resistance to the legacies of slavery and sharecropping and contemporary practices of social closure. These Black farmland owners, then, view land as protection from white domination[13]. The entanglement of agrarianism and slavery complicates the relationship between African Americans and the earth, making the healing narrative difficult. However, when natural elements that had no role in slavery are integrated, new avenues for the healing process are created.

There is a stark contrast within Morrison's work between agrarian elements that occur naturally in the American settings of her novels, and those that are non-indigenous and thus unnatural. Often, it is indigenous vegetation such as trees that offer Morrison's characters a source of healing from their historical trauma. Within Morrison's work, trees are often depicted

[12] "Agrarianism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/topic/agrarianism. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.
[13] Quisumbing King, K., Wood, S.D., Gilbert, J. and Sinkewicz, M. (2018), Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South. Rural Sociology, 83: 678

as sanctuaries and glimpses of wilderness and freedom from her character's unfortunate circumstances. Wilderness is defined as "an area devoid of human habitation, cultivation, or significant use"[14]. As historian William Cronon writes, for many Americans,

> "Wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet. As Henry David Thoreau once famously declared, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World"[15].

However, Cronon complicates this romanticized view of wilderness by asserting that, wilderness is "quite profoundly a human creation". Morrison's exploration of healing within the natural world shifts the focus from true wilderness to indigenous plant species, embodied in the symbolism of trees. While not representing pristine wilderness, these trees become symbols of sanctuary and healing for the characters. This is particularly important given their dissociation from the narratives of slave labor and cultivation. In essence, the healing narrative within Morrison's work suggests that, despite the constructed and potentially unnatural nature of wilderness, it still retains significant value as a source of healing from trauma inflicted by agrarian landscapes.

The integration of agrarian elements in Toni Morrison's literature elucidates the complex relationship between African Americans and the earth. In a 1981 interview in *The New Republic*

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[14] "Wilderness." *Oxford Reference*, www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001/acref-9780199599868-e-2049. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

[15] Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *William Cronon - Homepage*, www.williamcronon.net/writing/Trouble_with_Wilderness_Main.html. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

Review, Morrison said; "I must confess… that I sometimes lose interest in the characters and get much more interested in the trees and animals. I think I exercise tremendous restraint in this, but my editor says, 'Would you stop this beauty business.' And I say, 'Wait, wait until I tell you about these ants.'"[16] In a way, Morrison does not "lose interest" in her characters, but merely redirects their internal being to the external natural world. Embedded in the beauty of Morrison's narrative technique are details and symbols that reflect the deepest psychological aspects of her characters. The underlying environmental theme of Morrison's literature solidifies the idea that nature is interwoven in black history, and despite the trauma it brought, it also offers an essential part of pleasure, and subsequently, is a vital aspect of healing from the historical trauma. Morrison's exploration of trauma associated with slavery often intersects with images of non-indigenous crops. The juxtaposition of alien crops as symbols of historical injustice is countered by the earth's role as a source of healing. African Americans, in Morrison's narrative, possess a particularly intimate and complicated relationship with the land, where nature becomes an essential component of pleasure, and subsequently, a vital aspect of healing from historical trauma. Through her storytelling, Morrison consistently employs the land as a means of confronting historical trauma, offering readers an exploration of the intersection between personal and cultural history with the natural world.

The Foundations: Soil

The center of all growth is the soil upon which a seed, or a person for that matter, is developed. A place without good soil will not grow sufficient crops. Soil appears throughout Morrison's work as a symbol of a character's inability to grow, often indicated by linking the

[16] Curtis, Paige. "Three Ecological Lessons from Toni Morrison." *Sierra Club*, 24 Aug. 2022, www.sierraclub.org/sierra/three-ecological-lessons-toni-morrison-nature-symbolism.

characters to different plants that thrived or failed to thrive in certain soil. Soil bears significant value to African Americans impacted by slavery. Since 2015, An exhibit in the Legacy Museum in Alexandria, Alabama titled "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration in Alabama" features biocultural landscapes. 'Lynching in America: A Community Remembrance Project' exhibits nearly 700 jars of soil collected from lynching sites throughout the United States."[17] This exhibit is a fascinating testament to the value of land, and particularly, its soil. Wardi mentions this exhibit stating; "in many ways, the sweat of enslaved people is buried in this soil."[18] This exhibit offers a medium through which ancestors of enslaved people can confront their ancestral history in an incredibly intimate way. In bold letters on the website of this exhibit are the words; "There can be no reconciliation and healing without remembering the past,"[19] illuminating the idea that one must look not only to the past but also consider the very earth upon which these atrocities occurred. This quotation encapsulates the reason why the earth is such a powerful symbol in the African American healing narrative; this soil offers a physical reminder that aids in remembering the past by using the very earth where these horrific events took place. In many ways, the natural elements of Morrison's work also act as a medium through which African Americans can confront their historical trauma. Not only in the plotlines of her own characters but also in her audience, as her novels bring light to traumas buried deep within her readers, which Morrison reflects through nature imagery. Wardi writes "Not only does Morrison stand her fiction on the shoulders of her ancestors, but as material ecocriticism reveals, we are all standing on that

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[17] "Eji's Community Remembrance Project." *Equal Justice Initiative*, 6 Mar. 2024, eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/#:~:text=The%20Legacy%20Museum%20in%20Montgomery,of%20racial%20violence%20and%20lynching.

[18] Wardi, Anissa Janine. *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color*. University Press of Mississippi, 2021. 22.

[19] Eji's Community Remembrance Project." *Equal Justice Initiative*, 6 Mar. 2024, eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/#:~:text=The%20Legacy%20Museum%20in%20Montgomery,of%20racial%20violence%20and%20lynching.

unacknowledged and buried history."[20] Morrison's literary style, including her vivid imagery and indirect yet effective way of illustrating the lasting impact of historical trauma, is a manifestation of the ways in which authors write about the historical past. They use the earth to demonstrate their pain because directly writing about the horrors of slavery is exceedingly painful. Thus, the earth offers a sanctuary for these writers to discuss racial trauma. Viewing the earth through this lens adds another layer to the progression of industrialization and the spiritual relationship with the earth because the soil that is being changed, industrialized, and destroyed also carries decades of African-American trauma.

Morrison's novels often attribute the poor formation of an African American community to the impoverished soil upon which it resides. Soil and its regenerative properties become a recurring motif, particularly evident in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Not only does soil play a role in the narrative, but it is also an important indicator of place. When Morrison introduces the concept of poor soil in her novels, it serves as a forewarning that the characters will likely succumb to unfortunate fates inflicted by their hostile communities. Berry's perspective shares similarities with Morrison's narrative landscape, as both illustrate the intricate relationships between the health of the land, the individuals within a community, and the community itself. Berry explains "If a farmer fails to understand what health is, his farm becomes unhealthy; it produces unhealthy food, which damages the health of the community. But this is a network, a spherical network, by which each part is connected to every other part. The farmer is a part of the community and so it is as impossible to say exactly where the trouble began as to say where it will end."[21]Similarly, a poverty-stricken community lacking mutual support experiences a lack of positive growth, perpetuating a cyclic phenomenon. Morrison and Berry both perceive the earth

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[20] Wardi, Anissa Janine. *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color*. University Press of Mississippi, 2021. 24

[21] Berry, Wendell. *Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. Counterpoint, 2015.

as a vessel offering insights into the health of a community or an individual. While Berry's argument is more literal, Morrison symbolically weaves the earth into her narratives, most evidently through the fertility of the soil.

The Bluest Eye illustrates the notion of soil as a foundational element shaping a character's trajectory. The novel centers on Pecola, a victim of abuse from both her community and her family. After her father impregnates her and the child dies prematurely, Pecola is found searching through the garbage, symbolizing her alienation from society. The community in Lorraine, Ohio ostracizes her, perceiving her as ugly and dirty. In the final passage of the novel, Claudia, the narrator reflects on Pecola's fate, stating "I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our own town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late."[22]

Marigolds recur throughout *The Bluest Eye*, a symbol of a continuation of the cyclicality of nature, life, and hope. When they fail to bloom, it is because "the soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers."[23] Poor soil indicates hopelessness, death, and barrenness, and reflects Pecola's poor psychological condition and the unfortunate fate of her child. Examining the story through a racial lens, the soil can be interpreted as racism, hindering African Americans from blossoming and developing as they should. Pecola, in this context, represents the entire African American race, facing intraracial racism due to her darker skin. The passage notes that "certain seeds it will

[22] Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 206.
[23] ibid.

not nurture…", highlighting Pecola's experience of being deemed unattractive and bullied by her community. Pecola becomes the target of the town's oppression, a manifestation of intraracial racism. Bell hooks emphasizes her own connection between geographical location and psychological states of being, similar to Pecola's psychological ruin which is intricately linked to the environment and internalized racism in her community. Hooks' assertion that "internalized racism affected our emotional intelligence, our emotional life…"[24], resonates with Pecola's plight, which stemmed from the intraracial racism present within her community, ultimately resulting in her psychological demise. By shedding light on these dynamics, hook's argument helps uncover some of the contributing factors to Pecola's tragic fate..

The Bluest Eye begins with the words "Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did."[25]. The lack of marigold growth foreshadows Pecola's fate. Thus, it comes as no surprise to the reader when Claudia describes Pecola rummaging through waste, in a state of psychological ruin after the failure of her child's survival and her father's abuse. When the community does not contribute support and instead fosters hate in those who appear different from them, their growth is stunted. The community and environment in *The Bluest Eye* are synonymous with the soil, serving as the foundation for life. Therefore, in hostile soil, the marigolds did not grow, and in a hostile community, Pecola and her baby could not develop.

The repetition of "much, much, much too late" suggests that Pecola was sealed long before her existence. Growing up in this hostile and unnatural environment hindered her growth

[24] hooks, bell. *belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 19.
[25] Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 206.

and further prevented her child's development. Pecola's treatment by her community also acts as a testament to the existence of constraints and societal values rooted in racism and remnants of class systems from slavery, indicating that historical trauma is one of the underlying reasons for the community's harmful actions. This mistreatment of Pecola can be connected to the broader concept of racial oppression. Due to the community's preconceived notions about Pecola, their power over her, and unanimous agreement about her as an outsider, Pecola was unable to thrive- a manifestation of how racism operates. Returning to Berry's argument, the events in this novel also reflect the cyclicality of instances like this one: "The farmer is a part of the community and so it is as impossible to say exactly where the trouble began as to say where it will end."[26] The interconnectedness between humans and the natural world suggests that societal problems such as racism and environmental degradation are deeply intertwined and cannot be addressed in isolation. Berry's argument also implies that it is impossible to pinpoint the exact origins of community troubles, which perpetuates the systemic issues within communities. In the case of Lorraine, Ohio, this cycle began long before Pecola lived, and will continue long after she dies.

The cycle of oppression within the community in *The Bluest Eye* also arises in *Sula*. In the prologue to *Sula,* Morrison describes the leveling of a black neighborhood, called "The Bottom" so that it can be made into a golf course for white people. Sula takes place years before in 1920, when "The Bottom" was a place only for black people in the hills above Medallian, Ohio which was only for white people. "The Bottom" originated from a trick played on a slave, who, in exchange for arduous tasks, was promised freedom and fertile land. The white master deceitfully informed the black man that the best land was in the hills because it was the "bottom of heaven". "So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some" and he "got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and

[26] Berry, Wendell. *Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. Counterpoint, 2015.

where the wind lingered all through the winter"[27]. Despite these conditions, "The Bottom" evolved into a vibrant and dynamic African American community where the novel is set. On the surface, the bottom land clearly represents the adverse circumstances thrust upon African Americans by white individuals and underscores the cyclical nature of historically embedded racism. The land, initially cruelly bestowed upon a black man in exchange for his labor, transformed into a haven for the black community, only to be reclaimed later as a symbol of white excess and luxury.

The regenerative properties of soil within this passage also introduce the recurring agrarian theme of the natural renewal of life. Through the details about the lack of fertility in the Bottom soil, the reader is prepared to recognize the Bottom as a place of tragedy. As the novel continues, the audience learns that the Bottom is a place accustomed to loss, misfortune, and poverty. This misfortune is indicated by traditions in the Bottom such as Shadrack, a war veteran's "national Suicide day"[28], during which he marches through the Bottom, encouraging people to contemplate killing themselves or others. Despite the initial shock, this tradition has become engrained in the community, and people no longer react to the disruption.

Morrison strategically introduced the setting of the novel using this origin story in order to signify the idea that due to the Bottom's inability to grow crops, it also fosters an environment in which the residents are stunted in their ability to flourish. The theme of regeneration and cyclicality of soil appears throughout the novel, especially in the tendency of Sula's family to burn their family members alive when they feel they are broken by circumstance. This regenerative process of life and death, though devastating, also indicates hope for the characters. Sula's family believes that through the death of her family members through fire, they have the

[27] Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 3-5.
[28] Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 7.

opportunity to heal from the experiences that "broke" them. For instance, when Sula's grandmother Eva's son Plum returns from war a drug addict, she "rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight"[29]. Moments like this burning ritual always occur within Sula because the victim of the fire was exposed to the circumstances driven by poverty. Regeneration through fire can be associated with the agricultural practice of slash-and-burn farming, a traditional agricultural method wherein overused soil is intentionally burned to clear land for cultivation and to replenish nutrients in the soil[30]. This process symbolizes renewal and regeneration, as the burnt land becomes fertile ground for new growth and opportunity. In Sula's family, the tradition of burning takes on symbolic significance. Growing up in the Bottom, a place characterized by stagnation and poverty, the family members are trapped in a cycle of predetermined misfortune. The act of burning, therefore, serves as an attempt to break free from the constraints of their circumstances and to provide the potential for a new beginning. It also represents defiance against the oppressive forces that shaped their lives and to escape the cycle of hardship that seems inherent to their circumstances.

Soil and dirt remain a theme throughout *Sula*. After Sula overhears her mother saying that she loves Sula but does not like her, She and Nel;

> "began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hold the size of a cup. Nel

[29] Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 47.
[30] "Our Impact: Slash and Burn Agriculture: Ecologic Development Fund." *EcoLogic*, www.ecologic.org/our-impact/challenges/slash-and-burn-agriculture. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

> began a more strenuous digging as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust, she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could add were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass."[31]

The act of digging up roots with a twig and making a hole in the earth symbolizes the characters' need to unveil their true feelings and authentic selves, stripping away the layers of projections imposed by others. In this process, Nel absorbs Sula's trauma as her own, profoundly impacted by seeing Sula for who she truly is. The infertile soil of the Bottom land suggests that Sula's fate is somewhat predetermined by the community, but it is the trauma within her family that cements her unfortunate destiny and influences the rash decisions she makes throughout the novel. The act of burying unnatural objects in infertile soil conveys the message that Sula is inherently doomed due to her weak foundations.

This scene precedes the moment when Sula drowns Chicken Little, marking the first of her many poor life choices. Thus, the grave these two girls dig not only symbolizes Chicken Little's death but also solidifies Sula's fate. Familial historical trauma can permeate a child's life, predisposing them to decisions that lead to their demise. The women in Sula's family are ensnared by poverty and abuse, providing a weak foundation for growth. In this moment between Sula and Nel, the vicious cycle of poverty and trauma illustrated. It perpetuates the misfortunes of Sula's family and highlights the idea that many African Americans face predetermined challenges and constrained life choices due to impoverished beginnings. This analogy likens

[31] Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 58-59.

their circumstances to the soil in which they were rooted, suggesting that their opportunities were limited from the outset.

Later, when Sula is talking with her lover Ajax, she says “Then I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs. For it is the loam that is giving you that smell.” [32] Sula’s words reveal her desire to understand Ajax and to love him for his authentic self. Paradoxically, her words also serve as the catalyst for Ajax’s decision to leave her. In this context, loam represents untouched, fertile soil- an analogy for the characters in their unaltered state, free from external influences. The loam she wishes to see is “free of pebbles and twigs”, which indicates that this loam is untouched. This mirrors the overall theme of individuals being dealt poor soil which prevents positive growth. Ajax’s departure after Sula’s declaration suggests that his “loam” is not free from the confines that society has placed on it, reflecting the idea of soil as representative of the true self. The historical injustice of poor soil dealt to African Americans keeps their trauma alive, perpetuating a cycle of historical trauma that confines them to the bottom- a cycle of poverty and failure. The foundations made of poor soil are unable to be “free of pebbles and twigs” as these elements are deeply engrained in their history and in the very essence of their being.

Overall, the exploration of soil in Morrison's novels serves as a commentary on the enduring impact of historical injustices on African American communities. It reflects the cyclical patterns of oppression, the struggle for true self-discovery, and the potential for regeneration and renewal. Through this rich symbolism, Morrison invites readers to contemplate the intricate relationships between individuals, communities, and the environments that shape their lives. Through the lens of agriculture and regenerative practices, Morrison crafts a narrative that

[32] Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2024. 130.

unveils the struggles of many African Americans, symbolized by the impoverished soil they inhabit. The characters in Morrison's novels grapple with the consequences of poor soil—both metaphorically and literally—manifested in their personal and collective histories. The concept of soil as a vessel for historical trauma and the cyclical nature of oppression resonates throughout the narratives. The lack of marigold growth in *The Bluest Eye*, the tragic events in *Sula*, and the regenerative act of burning in Sula's family present soil as a powerful metaphor for the characters' experiences and the challenges they face. Additionally, Morrison uses the imagery of soil to emphasize the regenerative potential within individuals and communities. The cyclical nature of life and death, portrayed through the agricultural metaphor of slash-and-burn farming, suggests that there is hope for healing and renewal. Despite the adversity and hardships faced by the characters, the regenerative properties of soil symbolize the potential for growth and transformation, even in the face of historical trauma.

Historical Trauma Carried in the Earth: Agricultural Crops

Agricultural crops are the purest symbol of agrarian elements within Morrison's work. The unique narratives within *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* each characterize crops as ripe with cultural and historical value, and their appearance symbolizes the complex relationship between African Americans and agrarian landscapes due to the role of slavery and subsequent historical trauma. Specifically, non-indigenous crops, notably rice and sugarcane, serve as harbingers of trauma for Morrison's characters. As they are frequently associated with plantations- the very sites of intense historical suffering for enslaved individuals[33]. The link between plantation crops and agonizing memories aligns with the pervasive historical trauma rooted in the century of abuse suffered by slaves on these plantations.

[33] "Plantation." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/topic/plantation-agriculture. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

Rice serves as a recurring motif in *Beloved*, particularly in Sethe's recollections of her mother, Ma'am. Ma'am, taken from Africa, is primarily remembered by Sethe through her labor in the rice fields. This association symbolizes the involuntary separation of individuals from their African roots, as rice held cultural significance in Africa and now thrived in the New World. Despite giving birth to many children out of coercion, Ma'am "kept" Sethe as she was the child of the black man whom she "put her arms around"[34]. Every mention of Sethe's mother is intertwined with her working in the rice fields, as exemplified in Sethe's narrative: "By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright, they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must have nursed me two or three weeks… But then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was"[35]. Sethe's expression of feeling abandoned by her mother demonstrates the atrocities of slavery, where infants were forcibly separated from their mothers to serve as laborers, a practice that echoes the haunting legacy of slavery. Sethe's perceived abandonment is not a fault of her mother but a consequence of the systemic cruelty prevalent during slavery.

In her *Black Earth Wisdom*, Leah Penniman explores the significance of seeds as carriers of cultural narratives, stating that "seeds carry our stories."[36] Penniman references an oral history of the Matawai in Surinam that states "Mama Tjowa took a bundle of the rice that her people brought with them from Africa, and carefully braided the grains in her hair. And then, they ran, far, far, away from the plantation, teee (until)... They arrived at a hidden place, deep in the forest, where a lot of trees had fallen… they burned the trees, mama Tjowa loosened her hair, and shook the rice seeds on the ground. Some time later, rice seedlings grew from out of the fertile soil.

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[34] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 62.
[35] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 70.
[36] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 151.

Then, they took the harvest even further upriver and did the same thing again. And today, we plant and eat the same rice that Mama Tjowa brought for us to survive[37]. This narrative reinforces the idea that rice, beyond being a mere crop, transforms into a vessel for preserving identity, history, and the collective spirit of a people. Judith Carney, author of *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* asserts that these seeds were also brought on ships from Africa during the slave trade by Women who braided them in their hair and that "it was by a woman that rice was transplanted into Carolina."[38] The irony lies in the fact that while slaves allegedly brought rice seeds from Africa, they suffered abuse while cultivating the very crop originating from their homeland. The connection between femininity and rice is also illustrated in the image of the women braiding rice into their hair, symbolizing the inseparable link between their identity and the crop.

Sethe's memories of her mother solely associated with her labor in the rice fields exemplify how women slaves had their identities stripped from them, influencing their ability to mother effectively. This impact is transmitted across generations, evident in Sethe's struggles as a mother due to the enduring trauma passed down from her own mother. In essence, the narrative reflects an interplay of seed preservation, cultural identity, and the enduring legacy of slavery on women and their descendants.

Rice dominates Sethe's thoughts when recalling her mother, signifying the link between slavery and solidifying the idea that Sethe and other slaves born into its system were essentially "raised" by its oppressive structures. Sethe's mother, brought from Africa, is an example of the ties between rice and the African slave trade, where the crop becomes emblematic of the

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[37] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 147

[38] Carney, Judith. "Black Rice. The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2001, 240 páginas." *Revista colombiana de antropología*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2014, pp. 170

exploitative practices inherent in slave labor. Rice acts as a dual symbol of sustenance and heritage for various cultures, while simultaneously representing the horrors of slavery. Sethe, pregnant and determined to sever the atrocities of slavery, flees Sweet Home Plantation. However, neither she nor her children can completely escape the enduring impact of slavery. As Penniman says, “seeds carry our stories,” encompassing both the favorable and unfavorable memories within those stories. The narrative, therefore, becomes an exploration of how slavery persists through the symbolic significance of rice, connecting generations to a dark and complex history.

The crop, once a source of sustenance and a representation of the African homeland, becomes a tool of oppression, and a marker of the relentless and demanding labor imposed upon enslaved people. This symbolic transformation illustrates how the very elements associated with life and sustenance were perverted to perpetuate the institution of slavery. Furthermore, the choice to link Sethe's memories of her mother with rice reflects the systemic disruptions of familial bonds. Instead of symbolizing nurturing motherhood, the reference to rice signifies the forced separation of families due to the demands of slave labor. It highlights how the institution of slavery not only physically separated families but also intruded upon the symbolic and emotional aspects of motherhood. Considering historical contexts, rice cultivation held significant economic importance in the Southern United States during the era of American slavery. The correlation between Sethe’s mother and rice resonates with the broader historical reality of the exploitation of African American labor in agricultural settings. This symbolism adds layers to Sethe's personal memories, aligning them with the collective historical trauma of enslaved communities.

In *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist Milkman Dead and his friend Guitar Baines discuss sugar when they are twelve years old. This instance highlights a key difference between the two characters, stemming from the fact that Guitar is a character who carries deep family trauma. Guitar explains to Milkman that he hates "Candy, cake, stuff like that. I don't even like to smell it." because it "Makes [him] want to throw up." and "Milkman searched for a physical cause. He wasn't sure he trusted anybody who didn't like sweets. "You must have sugar diabetes." Guitar explains, "It makes me think of dead people. And white people. And I start to puke." Milkman does not understand and asks "Dead people?" and Guitar elaborates "Since I was little. Since my father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave us kids some candy. Divinity. A big sack of divinity. His wife made it special for us. It's sweet, divinity is. Sweeter than syrup. Real sweet."[39]. This scene demonstrates a key difference between Milkman and Guitar. While Milkman grew up sheltered, relatively wealthy, and largely unaware of racial subjugation, Guitar suffered its consequences firsthand. Much of Song of Solomon revolves around Milkman reconnecting with his historical and familial roots, and this moment situates the reader in Milkman's mental state. Because he only asks about the dead people and not the white people, it indicates just how sheltered the privileged Milkman is. The connection between sugar and his memory of his father's death at the hands of a white industrial machine bears a direct connection to the historical trauma of slavery. Sugarcane was one of the most prominent plantation crops, and here, although his father was a free man and this story takes place in Michigan, between 1931 and 1963, nearly a century after slavery was terminated, his father still died doing labor that a slave would have done, Guitar witnessed it, and a white man tried to compensate by feeding him sugar. This personal trauma therefore draws prominent parallels to slavery. Therefore, Guitar's aversion to sugar demonstrates the inability to escape from the memories of slavery and

[39] Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage International., 2019. 61.

how its aftermath remains in the collective consciousness of many African Americans. It also demonstrates the ongoing exploitation and dangers faced by African Americans in labor, even after the abolition of slavery. The fact that Milkman "doesn't trust" anyone who doesn't like sugar shows that he lacks an understanding and bears a disconnect to his race and historical past.

Both Guitar and Sethe's memories of their parents who were victims of slavery or the remnants of it are tied back to a plantation crop. This links their trauma to their history, making the image of plantation crops in Morrison a point of connection between collective trauma that remains through generations. This trauma vastly impacts both characters and largely defines who they are; Guitar in his hatred of white people and Sethe in her killing of her child to prevent her from falling victim to the horrors of slavery that Sethe had to endure.

The Healing Narrative: Trees

While non-indigenous crops act as a source of trauma for the characters in Morrison's work, native flora, most significantly, trees indicate opportunities for healing from historical trauma. These moments are most significant in *Beloved*, where trees act as a representation of vegetation that is not associated with slavery, and in turn, facilitates healing.

The most significant symbol of healing in *Beloved* occurs when Sethe, pregnant, and running away from Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky to 124 in Ohio, is on the verge of death, and a white girl named Amy who "came out [of] the trees and helped her"[40]. Upon viewing Sethe's scars, Amy says "It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk-its red and split wide open, full of sap, and 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.

[40] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 187.

You got a whole tree on it. In bloom"[41]. This is a vital moment for Sethe, as she is on the verge of giving up and succumbing to death when Amy saves her, and her words transform her scars from being whipped during slavery into a tree. In this way, Amy helps Sethe reclaim her scars. This is a pivotal moment in the story as well, as Sethe soon finds lifelong freedom in Ohio. Therefore, her "chokecherry tree" becomes a symbol of resilience for her. bell hooks writes "I was taught by farmers that wilderness land, the untamed environment can give life and it can take life… I know instinctively… that it is humankind and not nature that is the stranger on these grounds."[42] For characters who find solace in trees as well, hooks' idea rings true because whether or not the trees bring death or life, they offer freedom from slavery, and to Sethe, who kills her infant child to save her from slavery, life or death is a fair compromise so long as she is no longer a slave.

The role of trees as agents of healing is exemplified through Sethe's reunion with Paul D, who perceives trees as symbols of freedom. Paul D portrays trees as "inviting things you could trust and be near, talk to if you wanted, as he frequently did"[43]. This sentiment stems from his escape from Sweet Home, during which he "Follow[ed] the tree flowers"[44]. However, when Paul D learns of Sethe's "chokecherry tree", he only sees scars and does not fully grasp the meaning it holds for Sethe "a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew"[45]. Paul D does not resonate with Sethe's refiguring of her scars as a tree because, for him, they are merely a reminder of the abuse suffered at Sweet Home. Paul D's lack of understanding of Sethe's "chokecherry tree" emphasizes the individualized nature of healing and the complex impact of trauma on perception. For Paul D, the scars of his past at

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[41] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 79.
[42] Hooks, Bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 116.
[43] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 21
[44] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 112.
[45] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 21.

Sweet Home shape his understanding, hindering him from fully embracing Sethe's transformative view of her own scars.

In recounting a tree he named "Brother," Paul D highlights the relationship between those who suffered during slavery and their relationship with the natural world. "Brother" served as a sanctuary, a place of respite from the horrors of Sweet Home. Paul D shared a "friendship" with "Brother", often sitting beneath its branches with "Halle or the other Pauls, but more often with Sixo". The tree became a focal point for moments of relaxation, companionship, and shared wisdom. It emerges as an oasis, offering an escape from the horror these men endured daily. This communal connection to nature becomes a source of strength and camaraderie for the Sweet Home men, countering the isolation and brutality experienced on the plantation. In this way, the healing narrative extends beyond individual experiences to encompass shared spaces of sanctuary, emphasizing the power of the natural world in fostering recovery from trauma.

Sixo often "went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open,"[46]. Sixo, unlike Sethe and the rest of the Sweet Home men, was brought from Africa. Therefore, Sixo's nightly practice of dancing among the trees was his way of maintaining a connection with his African homeland. In Penniman's conversation with author and cultural geographer Dr. Carolyn Finney, Finney notes that "My idea of a 'right relationship'[with the land] is a deep commitment to a particular piece of land and to remain connected to that land even if forced to leave."[47] A "right relationship" with the land suggests a deep and enduring commitment to a specific place, even in the face of displacement. Sixo's decision to dance among the trees can be seen as an embodiment of this commitment. Despite being far from his homeland, Sixo seeks solace and connection with the land through his nighty dances. The act

[46] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 25.
[47] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 113.

becomes a form of spiritual resilience, allowing him to maintain a link with his African heritage that was forcibly taken from him. In Sixo's case, the trees become not only witnesses to his cultural resistance but also active participants in the preservation of his bloodlines. The trees serve as conduits for maintaining a spiritual connection that transcends physical displacement and temporal separation and suggests his resilience in his experience with slavery. The act of dancing among the trees also allows him to retain his identity as an individual outside of his identity as a slave.

When Sixo narrowly escapes punishment for meeting his lover, the "thirty-mile woman", he "had already melted into the woods before the lash could unfurl itself on his indigo behind"[48]. This moment indicates that he is merging with nature, emphasizing the trees as a refuge and a source of protection for Sixo. As the threat of the lash looms over him, the act of seeking shelter among the trees becomes a symbol of resistance against the brutality of slavery. This scene represents the idea that, for Sixo, the trees are more than just physical surroundings; they become allies in his struggle for freedom and autonomy. The act of "melting" into the woods becomes a ritualistic response to the violence of the lash, signifying a deep connection between Sixo and the natural environment. In the context of the healing narrative, this episode suggests that the trees not only shield Sixo from immediate harm but also serve as a means of spiritual and emotional refuge. In contrast to the dehumanizing and brutal treatment experienced by Sixo and other enslaved individuals, the woods offer a space where they can momentarily escape, assert agency, and find solace. This narrative aligns with the broader theme of trees facilitating healing, providing a counterpoint to the traumas inflicted upon the characters within the context of their enslavement.

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[48] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 25.

Another exploration is the way that trees function within Sethe's traumatic memories of Sweet Home. Sethe notes her frustration in her focus on the beauty of the trees rather than the atrocities committed against the boys she loved. She recalls "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world,"[49] and notes that "It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that"[50]. Sethe focusing on the trees may be a trauma response in which she redirects her memory to the trees because the memories of the events that occurred are too painful. Sethe's redirection of focus to the sycamores aligns with the dissociative response, providing a psychological refuge from the traumatic memories. The symptoms of dissociation are "the loss of the sense of self or denial of personal history...difficulty remembering information about themselves or sometimes switch to different voices and names, and display erratic behaviour…substantial gaps in recollection."[51] The choice of trees as a comforting element in Sethe's traumatic memories underscores their symbolic significance as sources of solace and healing. Sethe's turning to the trees in her memories suggests that, amidst the chaos and pain, the natural world becomes a sanctuary- a place where she can momentarily escape the harsh reality of her past and find a semblance of peace. This complex interplay between trauma, memory, and the soothing presence of trees contributes to the healing narrative.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores the healing properties of trees as symbols of resilience and recovery from historical trauma. Through her character's relationships with indigenous vegetation, Morrison's exploration of the healing narrative underscores the transformative power

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[49] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Classics, 2023. 7.
[50] ibid.
[51] "The Link between Disassociation and PTSD." *PTSD UK* |, www.ptsduk.org/the-link-between-disassociation-and-ptsd/#:~:text=Symptoms%20and%20signs%20of%20dissociation&text=It%20can%20appear%20to%20be,have%20substantial%20gaps%20in%20recollection. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

of the natural world in fostering recovery from historical trauma. Through these narratives, she captures the resilience and the reclamation of identity amidst the legacy of slavery.

Reconciliation and Revitalization

Literature from authors like Morrison, hooks, Penniman, and Berry become mediums through which to look for indicators of past and present reconciliation narratives. These stories engage with the idea of reconciliation, acting as voices for the relationship between African Americans and the earth emphasizing the vital role of the earth within the healing narrative. Today, in an ever-industrializing society, connection with the earth becomes more and more difficult as people are unintentionally distanced from it. Contemporary authors like Penniman and hooks remind us of its importance and its role in the healing narrative.

An important idea highlighted by Penniman and hooks is that the relationship between African Americans and the land predates the traumatic era of slavery, and is therefore not defined by the trauma slavery entailed. Rather, the connection to the land demonstrates a resilient and enduring relationship rooted in ancestral history. Penniman acknowledges this, writing that "Dangerous mythology prevails that black people's relationship with the land is circumscribed by chattel slavery and has no connection to the global organic and regenerative agricultural movements,"[52] and that "The land stood on the shoulders of our agrarian ancestors. Everything imaginable on our land sprung from their labor, pain, and aspirations for us. When we ground ourselves in an African agro-ecological framework."[53] So because of this, perhaps the healing that the land provides is not a result of slavery, but a result of the fact that it reflects their ancestral history long before the Trans-Atlantic slave trade existed. Bell hooks notes the return of

[52] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 117.
[53] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 116.

Black people who "migrated north to escape life in the South returned down home in search of a spiritual nourishment, a healing, that was fundamentally connected to reaffirming one's connection to nature". This return indicates a reclamation of the ancestral value embedded in the land, surpassing the trauma experienced in the South. hooks emphasizes this by writing that "growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the Earth that was ongoing and life-affirming."[54] The land, therefore, becomes a source of strength, continuity, and ancestral identity that persists beyond slavery.

In the context of revitalization, the notion of reclaiming agrarian landscapes is an important theme, particularly evident in Morrison's Song of Solomon. After undergoing a spiritual awakening that entails uncovering his familial past, Milkman visits his grandfather, Macon Dead's farm, known as the "best in Montour county" and named "Lincoln's Heaven". The farm allegedly spoke directly to Macon and conveyed a message of empowerment and agency despite the trials of slavery;

> "You see the farm said to them. See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling," it said. Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage, We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home, you got one too! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home, you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, shake it,

[54] Hooks, Bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 47.

> squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on- can you hear me? Pass it on!"[55]

This excerpt asserts that the farmland belongs to African Americans as much as anyone else, providing them the freedom to shape it according to their will. This becomes a pivotal moment in the reclamation narrative because it outlines the possibilities of reclaiming identity, cultural belonging, and a national home despite the historical hardships of slavery. This quote also notes a generational continuity of this sense of empowerment, indicated by the words "pass it on!", thus encapsulating reconciliation and resilience, and signifying the transformative power of the land in the face of historical trauma and systemic injustice. Similarly, the call to "grab this land, and the reiterated phrase "we got a home in this rock" emphasize the idea that the land is not just a physical space but a symbolic refuge where African Americans can assert their ownership, freedom, and cultural identity. The name "Lincoln's Heaven" holds additional symbolism, representing the liberation associated with President Abraham Lincoln and the abolition of slavery. The farm becomes a resilient voice challenging the limitations imposed by slavery, asserting the agency of African Americans in shaping their destinies and reclaiming the agrarian landscapes that were once sites of slavery. The use of punctuation along with the empowered and confident statements situates the farm as a site of empowerment and defiance and promotes a vision of reconciliation with the land that acknowledges a painful history while celebrating the potential for healing, agency, and cultural identity. Thus, Morrison's narrative promotes a vision of reconciliation with the land, one that not only acknowledges the painful history but also celebrates the possibilities of healing, agency, and cultural continuity. The farm, in this context,

[55] Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage International. 2019. 235.

becomes a symbol of hope, resilience, and a tangible space where the intricate relationship between African Americans and the land is rewritten and reclaimed.

The farm's "call" in *Song of Solomon* aligns with the perspectives of Leah Penniman, bell hooks, and others on reclaiming the relationship with the earth by engaging in agricultural practices themselves. bell hooks writes "To tend the Earth is always then to tend our destiny, our freedom and our hope." and "When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully."[56], which emphasizes the idea that nurturing the land is an essential aspect of human existence. Similarly, Penniman notes that "We can reclaim that inherent right to belong to the land and that dignity and agency in the food system and not be thinking that our relationship to farming is just rooted in oppression."[57] These statements situate the earth at the heart of a human being, making it a necessity. This sense of imparativeness of the earth on humans challenges the increase in industrialization which leads to environmental depletion. They compel us to contemplate the repercussions of this environmental depletion on minority groups who turn to the earth for healing, power, and a connection to their ancestry and resilience.

In conclusion, the narratives presented by authors that follow the naturalist and black agrarian literary traditions compel the readers to reconsider the human relationship with the earth, urging us to recognize its intrinsic value and transformative power within the healing narrative. They advocate for a vision of reconciliation that acknowledges the painful history while also celebrating the possibilities of healing, agency, and cultural continuity embedded within the land. In an ever-industrializing world, these voices are important reminders of the significance of reclaiming our connection with the earth for the well-being of both humanity and the earth.

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[56] hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2019. 34.
[57] Penniman, Leah. *Black Earth Wisdom Soulful Conversations with Black Environmentalists*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. 145.

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