

Towards a Reconstruction of African American Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

*This essay presents Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a platform through which Derrida's deconstruction could be used to assert the Black identity and illuminate his/her presence. *Beloved* shows the way the African American identity could be reconstructed through its own cultural heritage and social structure. It makes a connection between history and personal and cultural memories. In this sense, healing of memories is the first step needed to self-identification.*

Key Words: Identity, Trace, Différance, supplement.

Introduction

The project of Toni Morrison in *Beloved* is to make a connection between history and personal and cultural memories to participate in the formation of the Black community's identity. The author illustrates how the African American identity could be reconstructed through its own cultural heritage and social structure. Morrison depicts an enormous and horrific context which is the period of slavery and reconstruction. After the abolition of slavery, the psyches of the characters are filled with traumatic experiences that they faced during slavery, which have influenced their personalities and damaged their relations with themselves.

Worse than that--far worse-- was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up.¹ (251)

Beloved is a narrative structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the promises of a just future. After exorcising *Beloved*, Paul D says "Sethe,"... "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow"² (273). The novel focuses on the personal histories to fill the gaps neglected by historians. The every day and inner lives of those "disremembered and unaccounted for"³ (274) as well as their memories of the past represent "the truest of Histor(y)"⁴ (BMBB 88). In this respect, Jacques Derrida, one of the most well known philosopher of the twentieth century and the founder of 'deconstruction', a way of criticising, elaborates that

Literature as historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them,...to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history.⁵ (TSICL 37)

Morrison focuses on the reconstruction of the identity of Black community in *Beloved* mainly through her two female protagonists Sethe and Denver. She states in an interview

So I've just insisted – insisted! – upon being called a black woman novelist, and I decided what that meant, because I have claimed it. I have claimed what I know. As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither.⁶ (CTM 243)

However, she shows interest in the presence of Black maleness essentially through the character of Paul D. *Beloved* traces a link between the feminine and the collective identity. It represents the historic trauma of history through female figures. Even though the text is first and foremost focalised on Sethe's subjectivity, her personal experience as depicted in the novel is shown by Morrison as related to the community.

1. Slavery: Physical but Psychic Damage

Black community has greatly suffered slavery and its appalling tragedies. The narrative is filled with representations of the assaults of slavery, especially on enslaved Black women.

The hardships and humiliation they have faced have left them with psychic and bodily repercussions. Indeed, in their attempt to isolate themselves and to forget the horrors of the past, they must nonetheless confront what it is left in their memories from the pain of that past. Hence, the ‘trace’ of trauma follows them, urging them to reconcile with their past, because this is the right path to acknowledge their agency in American society and to affirm their existence. Trace is one of the most important concepts of Derrida’s deconstruction, presented in the 1960’s in two of his books “*Of Grammatology*” and “*Writing and Difference*”; yet, it is useful for many contemporary writings such as *Beloved*. It is the “mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present”⁷ (Of Gram xvii). Trace is the play between the present and the absent through which the meaning is never known directly but allows everything else to be comprehended. Derrida says “the trace is the différance which opens appearance and signification”⁸ (Dis 65). Meanwhile, différance conveys meaning through a process of differing and deferring. By utilizing the trace of the past, Morrison evokes not only the trauma implanted in the mind of the individual but also of the whole community.

Morrison offers a womanist tenet through highlighting Sethe’s journey for self-recognition in an aggressive environment. Sethe witnesses the results of slavery’s bestiality on her preceding generation. Nan, the only other surviving member with Sethe’s mother of the slave ship, “told Sethe that her mother and [she] were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew”⁹ (62). They both carry the hurt of the Middle Passage and the oppression of the white masters. Sethe’s mother, like the other Black slaves, was treated with dehumanization, working from dawn until late in the night in the rice fields. She did not have enough time to spend it with her child as she spent her only day off, Sunday, sleeping. She once showed Sethe a mark made by her oppressors “a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin”¹⁰ (61) just like cattle are branded.

Simultaneously, Sethe’s journey of suffering leaves physical scars on her back, another indication of the terrible violence practiced on slaves. Schoolteacher’s nephews beat her when she was pregnant with Denver to the point that they injured her so badly so that “her back skin had been dead for years”¹¹ (18). They held her and sucked her breasts. The fact that “they took (her) milk”¹² (17) by force is clearly traumatising to her as well as to her husband Halle, who saw what happened but was unable to do anything. Consequently, Sethe feels lost, fractured, robbed of her identity and fundamental essence as a woman and as a mother. Her special individual experience and suffering make her capable of killing her children to save them from the brutality of slavery. The victim of this infanticide is her two year old daughter Beloved, whose role is central to the formation of the characters’ identities. As Beloved symbolises the pain of the past, her return in flesh can be read as the trace of the traumatic past left in the minds of each of the characters, because at the end of the novel her disappearance illustrates the very reason of their rapprochement with themselves and with their community. Derrida claims that “there is no breach without difference and no difference without trace”¹³ (MP 18). *Beloved* depicts the traces of trauma as well as the ways to heal the psychic wounds dug in the memories of the characters.

2. The Restoration of the Past: the Path for Self and Communal Reconstruction

The wound is re-opened by the ghost’s appearance in the lives of the protagonists which paves the way for them to re-examine their past and confront it. After being rejected by the society in “eighteen years of disapproval and solitary life”¹⁴ (173), Sethe and Denver live isolated from their community, as the latter demands an explanation or an apology for her crime. Indeed, Sethe is unable to forget her act of murder. She feels guilty. At the same time, there seems to be a very small part in her subconscious capable of forgiving and rebuilding herself again. Derrida assumes that “If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable”¹⁵ (On Cos 32). Therefore, the return of Beloved in the flesh is remarkable. It denotes the returning of the repressed past that was once unforgivable; thus opening the way for forgiveness. Bell hooks argues that “there is nothing about the pain of the past that I have not forgiven, but forgiveness does not mean that one forgets”¹⁶ (TCPH 119). Initially, Sethe makes every effort to provide her with all love and care that was denied before. Her love is “too thick”¹⁷ (203) faced with Beloved possessiveness.

Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes...She felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire. Sethe stirred and looked around. First at Beloved’s soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control.¹⁸ (57-8)

With Beloved, Sethe’s love increases quickly out of control. She believes that Beloved is “the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love”¹⁹ (251).

As time goes by, this love becomes possessive, especially on the part of Beloved, and to which Sethe responds. Sethe gives up her work to be at the service of Beloved, who totally manipulates her. When she starts to express her thoughts and give arguments and reasons that led up to Beloved's murder, Beloved does not even listen. She, instead, voices her pain of the past when her mother abandoned her and killed her.

Then the mood changed and the arguments began...Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through ...Beloved wasn't interested. She said when she cried there was no one. That dead men lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light. Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life....Beloved denied it.²⁰ (241-42)

Beloved's behaviour becomes progressively demonic and results in the progressive physical and mental deterioration of her mother. "When once or twice Sethe trie[s] to assert herself—be the unquestioned mother whose word [i]s law and who kn[ows] what[is] best---Beloved slam[s] things, wipe[s] the table clean of plates, thr[ows] salt on the floor, br[eaks] a windowpane"²¹ (242). Derrida claims that "Each time forgiveness is effectively exercised, it seems to suppose some sovereign power...one only forgives where one can judge and punish"²² (On Cos 59). At this level, the ghost in the flesh becomes a real menace to Sethe's life.

In effect, Beloved stands as a symbol for an interconnection between the past and the present. She represents the "arche-phenomenon of 'memory'"²³ (Of Gram 70). So she returns and takes over the characters' present-day household. Originally, she begins to ask Sethe questions about things in her past she could not possibly know unless she had been there. "Beloved asked: "Where your diamonds? "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" And most perplexing: Tell me your earrings"²⁴ (63). The question that directly comes to mind is "How did she know?"²⁵ (63). Beloved's questions and constant demands for stories re-open the wounds and prevail upon Sethe to remember. In telling stories that she has never told to Denver or Paul D, but which she willingly shares with Beloved, Sethe experiences an awakening of pain and anger. She remembers her mother who was not allowed to nurse her and who was killed for a mysterious reason. Besides, she recalls happy events that she welcomes and laughs about. For example, when she discovered that she and Halle have no right to make a ceremony for their wedding, she insisted on having some ritual of her own so she "made up [her] mind to have at least a dress... [she] took to stealing fabric, and wound up to a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in"²⁶ (59). Clearly, Sethe refuses to accept constraints imposed on her by the organization of slavery. Beloved, as a result of her otherworldly knowledge, has asked the right questions; thus reliving Sethe's past who, in her turn, starts the process of working through her grief.

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there---like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left.

But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the vents itself, or her thirst for hearing it---in any case it was an unexpected pleasure.²⁷ (58) As much as Beloved is healed by her mother's words, storytelling is also healing to Sethe. Beloved plays a crucial role in making Sethe learn to acknowledge her wounds of the past and to recollect the pieces of "something she had forgotten she knew"²⁸ (61). Likewise, Denver's restoration of the older sister can erase the psychological damage left by her mother's past act of murder, which made her brothers, Howard and Buglar, run away, and which made her ostracized from the Black society in which she lives.

Importantly, Denver represents the future generation of the Black community that developed just after slavery. She was born with the help of a white girl called Amy Denver on the river that divided free and slave lands during Sethe's flight from Sweet Home. After the act of infanticide, Denver drinks milk from her mother's nipple dirty with her sister's blood. She even goes to jail with Sethe and suffers from the same marginalization and seclusion imposed by the community. She finds herself isolated from her people, living with her mother and her grandmother Baby Suggs, before she dies, at 124 Bluestone Road.

In fact, she seems to be trapped by her mother's repressed past. When she attends a children's class conducted by Lady Jones, a light-skinned black woman of mixed race who has a strong sense of community and teaches the underprivileged children of Cincinnati in her home, to learn to read and write

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 talk with her. It was Nelson Lord--- the boy as smart as she was-- who put a stop to it; who asked her the question about her mother that put chalk, the little i and all the rest that those afternoons held, out of reach forever....She never went back ...certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her.²⁹ (102)

Accordingly, she becomes increasingly lonely and self-centred, afraid of the outside world. Nevertheless, she is the first to accept Beloved as the baby ghost that returns back to life. For her, Beloved represents refuge, the removal of the threat posed by Sethe. She says "Beloved is my sister...Waiting for me... Ready for me... to protect her"³⁰ (205-6). Just like her mother, Denver prevents the past from trespassing on her life. Most of her knowledge about the past is related to her father, recounted by her grandmother. Moreover, her favourite story is that of her birth. Undoubtedly, "She ha[s] her own set of questions which ha[ve] nothing to do with the past. The present alone interest[s] [her]"³¹ (119). Nonetheless, through Beloved, Denver begins to experience the past; when she recounts for her the story of her birth "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it--- through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked"³² (78). Clearly, Beloved represents a therapeutic resource for Denver's status and psyche. With the arrival of Beloved, Denver feeds her hunger for sisterhood. She is transformed from a lazy and childish person to an active and mature person. "Patience, something Denver ha[s] never known, overt[akes] her"³³ (54). She attempts to keep Beloved for herself, because only with her does she feel comfort and real companionship. They go skating on ice together "holding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice ...screaming with laughter"³⁴ (174).

Yet, Beloved is obsessed with Sethe. "Denver's chances of being looked at by her go down to nothing...when her mother is anywhere around, Beloved has eyes only for Sethe"³⁵ (121). However, as times goes by, Denver starts to recognize her mother's gradual collapse under Beloved's destructive possession; thus "the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved"³⁶ (243). She decides to protect her mother from danger. Just at this particular moment, one can acknowledge Denver's maturity and self-recognition. She leaves the house to seek help from her community. She overcomes her fear of the outside world with the encouragement of her grandmother's spirit. She says to her "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on"³⁷ (244).

By going out to the community and calling on it to save her mother's life, Denver takes her first step towards reconciliation with her society. She recognizes the importance of communal unity to recover the past and reclaim the present. She goes and demands help from Lady Jones, who takes the initiative in reviving the communal sense. In a little while, Denver finds food in the yard of 124, some with names and others without. As things get worse at 124, Denver goes to ask for help from the Bodwins where she meets Janey, their Black maid, who helps her to find work with them and who spreads Sethe's story around the town. When Ella, an ex-slave who was sexually abused by a white man and his son, she also helps Sethe and Denver to arrive at 124 to Baby Suggs after Stamp Paid left them on the riverbank, hears the story of Sethe and her murdered daughter; she gathers the women of the community and they go to Sethe's house to exorcise the ghost of Beloved. "It [i]s Ella more than anyone who convince[s] the others that rescue [i]s in order. She [i]s a practical woman who believe[s] there [i]s a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment"³⁸ (256).

What one can deduce is that Denver serves as the bridge which makes her mother discard the possession of the past and return to the present. She is, also, the one who allows all the community to confront their past. Beloved, who symbolizes that past, functions as the agent who brings the members of the women's community to Sethe's rescue. Their confrontation with her makes them understand Sethe's act of infanticide as they share many of her miseries: "there was...something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present"³⁹ (256). Women's voices joining together to perform a collective exorcism is a very crucial image in the novel which means that only through unity could the Black community regain their agency and freedom, once taken from them in the past, and go into the process of recovery and self identification.

Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her.⁴⁰ (262)

Beloved vanishes and leaves behind the promise of an optimistic future through the character of Denver, who liberates the whole race memory and plans a better position in the society. Her going out of the yard marks a great step into the future based on 'Knowing' rather than being isolated, which represents the basis of the reconstruction of the self and the community. She even has intention to go to college "she (Miss Bodwin) says I might go to Oberlin"⁴¹ (266) which opens a new path of hope to future Black generations.

Furthermore, one cannot forget the male figure Paul D, whose presence in the novel is crucial. Paul D also suffers from the brutality of slavery physically and emotionally. At Sweet Home, he loses his dignity with an iron bit put in his mouth and the whips of schoolteacher. In addition, he bears the pain of losing his brother and friends. He speaks to Sethe about schoolteacher and the savagery he suffered from at his hands.

Yeah, he was hateful all right. Bloody, too, and evil....He sat right there on the tub looking at me. I swear he smiled. My head was full of what I'd seen of Halle a while back. I wasn't even thinking about the bit. Just Halle and before him Sixo, but when I saw Mister I knew it was me too. Not just them, me too. One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me.⁴² (72)

All this cruel treatment makes him doubt his manhood, which depends heavily on Mr. Garner's labelling him and the other slaves as men. He says "Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a white man who was supposed to know?"⁴³ (125). He complains about his oppressed status and identity. He says "Mister is allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was"⁴⁴ (72). Like the other characters, Paul D represses the past. He buries it in a "tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut"⁴⁵ (137). Despite the fact that he finds refuge with Sethe to whom he recounts things he "never told a soul"⁴⁶ (71), it is only with Beloved that his tobacco tin is opened. In a way, Beloved manages to open him to his repressed memories.

She (Beloved) moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin....what he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, "Red hear. Red heart," over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself.⁴⁷ (117)

In a brief but crucial interlude, Morrison reveals a very meaningful image of the sexual act between Beloved and Paul D. Having sex with this woman fulfils Paul D's thirst and desire for sex with a young lady, something that he dreamt about but never had the opportunity to do during the slavery period. "Whenever she [Beloved] turned her behind up, the calves of his youth (was that it?) cracked his resolve"⁴⁸ (126). Even when Sethe, as a young woman, came to Sweet Home, he and the other slaves respected her femininity and humanity. Despite being "so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves"⁴⁹ (10), they gave her the freedom to choose one of them as a husband. Moreover, having sex with Beloved proves his malehood and releases long-buried, hurtful memories of Sweet Home and Alfred, Georgia prison. Paul D is now able to expose his past and cure[s] his wounds; this can be seen when "he wants to put his story next to hers [Sethe]"⁵⁰ (273). Crucially, Beloved serves as the agent of his change. bell hooks believes that "By confronting the past without shame we are free of its hold on us"⁵¹ (TCPH 119).

In the light of what has been asserted, one can conclude that Beloved is the instrument by which the main characters as well as the whole community revise their memories. She is what Derrida calls "the supplement," which is "something that completes or makes an addition"⁵² (Webster Online). She is the past and present, the centre and the periphery as she symbolizes the past that is intentionally kept "at bay"⁵³ (42); yet it is the core for the self recognition of the Black community. She causes all the community to confront her, thus confronting their past to reclaim their present.

The supplement is maddening because it is neither presence nor absence...A terrifying menace, the supplement is also the first and surest protection; against that very menace...The supplement has not only

the power of procuring an absent presence through its image; procuring it for us through the proxy [procurator] of the sign...For this presence is at the same time desired and feared. The supplement transgresses and at the same time respects the interdict...Thus the supplement is dangerous in that it threatens us with death.⁵⁴ (DS 96-7)

Similarly, *Beloved* not only represents the past of the particular individuals in the novel, but also extends this representation to “the sixty million and more” to whom Morrison dedicates the novel. Moreover, as a reminder of the horrific past which possesses the characters, *Beloved* is a threat to their lives; yet, they must face it and acknowledge its pain because it is part of their self-definition. Indeed, the characters go into a process of what Derrida labels “Différance” that is “delaying or in diverting the fulfilment of a ‘need’ or ‘desire’”⁵⁵ (Differance 562). They take their time to recognize the basic way to their self-affirmation. In this sense, healing of memories is the first step needed to self-identification. It enables a new life in the future. So by examining the desire to repress memory, Sethe, Denver, Paul D and the whole community go into a process of psychic recovery. They discover a new way of reading the world, themselves and others. Strikingly, Toni Morrison echoes the womanist vision through craving more space for her female protagonists. She creates a female figure that symbolises the hurt of the past as well as restoring sisterhood.

Endnotes

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 251.

² Morrison 273.

³ Morrison 274.

⁴ Toni Morrison, “Behind the Making of the Black Book,” *Black World* (Feb. 1974): 88.

⁵ Derek Attridge, ed. “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 37.

⁶ Gail Caldwell, “Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*,” *Conversations With Toni Morrison* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 243.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Maryland : The Johns Hopkins University, 1998) Xvii.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 65.

⁹ Morrison 62.

¹⁰ Morrison 61.

¹¹ Morrison 18.

¹² Morrison 17.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982) 18.

¹⁴ Morrison 173.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001) 32.

¹⁶ Bell Hooks, *Teaching community: a Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 119.

¹⁷ Morrison 203.

¹⁸ Morrison 57-8.

¹⁹ Morrison 251.

²⁰ Morrison 241-42.

²¹ Morrison 242.

²² Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism* 59.

²³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 70.

²⁴ Morrison 63.

²⁵ Morrison 63.

²⁶ Morrison 59.

²⁷ Morrison 58.

²⁸ Morrison 61.

²⁹ Morrison 102.

³⁰ Morrison 205-6.

³¹ Morrison 119.

³² Morrison 78.

³³ Morrison 54.

³⁴ Morrison 174.

³⁵ Morrison 121.

- ³⁶ Morrison 243.
³⁷ Morrison 244.
³⁸ Morrison 256.
³⁹ Morrison 256.
⁴⁰ Morrison 262.
⁴¹ Morrison 266.
⁴² Morrison 72.
⁴³ Morrison 125.
⁴⁴ Morrison 72.
⁴⁵ Morrison 137.
⁴⁶ Morrison 71.
⁴⁷ Morrison 117.
⁴⁸ Morrison 126.
⁴⁹ Morrison 10.
⁵⁰ Morrison 273.
⁵¹ Hooks, Teaching community 119.
⁵² "supplement," Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2009, Merriam-Webster Online, 19 June 2009
 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/supplement>>.
⁵³ Morrison 42.
⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, "That Dangerous Supplement," Acts of Literature (New York: Routledge, 1992) 96-7.
⁵⁵ Derrida, Differance 562.

A List of Abbreviations

- AA= Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays. The University of Texas Press, 1990
 AEL= Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas. Stanford University Press, 1999
 AIW= Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism. South End Press, 1981
 BFT= Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. Routledge, 1991
 BMBB="Behind the Making of the Black Book." Black World (Feb. 1974)
 CA="Coming Apart." Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography.
 William Morrow and Company, 1982
 CAW="A Conversation with Alice Walker." Kalliope 6 (1984). Rpt. Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Amistad, 1993
 CD="Castration or Decapitation?" Signs 7, no. 11 (Autumn 1981)
 CFC="Coming in From the Cold: Welcoming the old, Funny-talking Ancient Ones into the Warm Room of Present Consciousness, or, Natty Dread Rides Again!" Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987.
 Harcourt Brace, 1988
 CRC= The Combahee River Collective
 Critical Essays= Critical Essays on Toni Morrison. G.K. Hall, 1988
 CTM= Conversations with Toni Morrison. The University of Mississippi, 1994
 DBFT= "Defining Black Feminist Theory." The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory. Routledge, 1997
 DI= The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981
 Differance= "Differance." The Phenomenology Reader. London: Routledge, 2002
 Dis= Dissemination. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981
 DS="That Dangerous Supplement." Acts of Literature. Routledge, 1992
 FTP="Feminism: A Transformational Politics." Theoretical Perspectives On Sexual Difference. Yale University Press, 1990
 HLBFC="The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism." Reading Black Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology. Meridian, 1990
 ISMG= In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983
 MP= Margins of Philosophy. Chicago University Press, 1982
 NBW= The Newly Born Woman. The University of Minnesota Press, 1986
 NL= Nobel Lectures, Literature 1991-1995. World scientific, 1997
 Lecture NPL= Lecture and Speech of Acceptance Upon the Award of the Nobel Prized for Literature, Delivered in Stockholm on the Seventh of December, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-three. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993

Of Gram=Of Grammatology. The Johns Hopkins University, 1998
On Cos=On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness. Routledge, 2001
Playing=Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Vintage Books, 1993
PM=Paper Machine. Stanford University Press, 2005.
PSJ=Possessing the secret of joy. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
Rootedness="Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." Black Women Writers (1950-1980). Pluto Press, 1983
RT="The Race for Theory." The Black Feminist Reader. Blackwell, 2000
TB=Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black. Boston: South End P, 1990 TBo=The Third Body. Northwestern University Press, 1999
TCPH=Teaching community: a Pedagogy of Hope. Routledge, 2003
The Laugh= "The Laugh of the Medusa." New French Feminisms. Schocken, 1981
TME=The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia. Greenwood P, 2003
TSICL="This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." Acts of Literature. Routledge, 1992
UTU="Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." Modern Critical views: Toni Morrison. Chelsea House, 1990
WD=Writing and Difference. The University of Chicago Press, 1978
WMM=What Moves at the Margin. The University Press of Mississippi, 2008
Writing=Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Colour. Greenwood Press, 2006

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