No Place like Home: Journeying in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

**Key-words:** home, journeying, African American,

**Abstract:** This article explores the shifting relationship between home and journeying in the works of Toni Morrison. The journey both to and away from home is a structuring principle in many of Morrison’s narratives, as journeying is connected to a desire for escapism and anonymity, but also to the painful process of remembering unspeakable histories. Homes are depicted as important physical spaces and as shifting spiritual, historical constructs mediated by slave narrative, song, myth and competing versions of African American history. These journeys represent a literal and symbolic escape from oppressive homes, from the patriarchal family home in *Song of Solomon* to the imprisoning “Sweet Home” slave plantation that haunts *Beloved*. Nomadism becomes incorporated in the narrative technique itself through the non-linear, meandering structure and shifting perspectives. However, these journeys out of the home in Morrison’s writing exist alongside complex journeys back to homelands and a corresponding sense of personal history.

The complex relationship between journeying and concepts of home is central to the works of Toni Morrison. The journey both to and away from home is a structuring principle in many of Morrison’s narratives, particularly *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), as the process of journeying is connected to a desire for escapism and anonymity, but also to the painful processes of telling and remembering unspeakable histories. This paper explores notions of home and homeland as both an important physical, often gendered space and a shifting spiritual, historical construct mediated by slave narrative, song, myth and competing versions of African American history.

In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison subtly inverts the classic epic motif of an individual journey back *into* an idealised home, by depicting multiple journeys breaking *out*
of oppressive domestic confinement. The domestic space emerges as an important setting but also a trigger for the story-telling itself; each section of *Beloved*, for example, begins with the home as a point of departure: “124 was spiteful”(3), “124 was quiet”(239). In these novels, homes function as containers for intersecting desires and memories, associated with an architectural and temporal fixity, as well as a rigid delineation of the boundaries of identity. Morrison’s preoccupation with the violation of interior spaces: domestic, bodily and psychological, is mirrored in a frequent intrusion of the past into the present in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The literal invasions of the home by ambivalent outside forces leads to an uncanny blurring between inside and outside, “heimlich” and “unheimlich,” and a corresponding disintegration of the boundaries of the narrative itself.

*Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* Morrison draw upon myths of escape from literal, domestic and bodily confinement through the recurring motif of journeying: myths of flight, echoes of slave narrative and folklore. Yet, at the same time, the novels explore the problematic nature of existence or “dilemma of the rescued” (Morrison, *Race-ing Justice* 29) upon arrival. Christine, in *Love* (2003), registers this paradoxical protection and constraint, shelter and confinement, within the domestic space. For Christine, home and homeland have a unique significance: “there’s no place like and no place but home” (167).

**Escape from Claustrophobic Interiors**

In her fiction, Morrison focuses on liminal spaces, poised between the inside and outside of individual homes and wider communities, as sites of transition in the complex re-negotiation of domestic, temporal and narrative boundaries. Many of Morrison’s characters experience a sense of exclusion, of inhabiting the peripheries of society: Milkman, in *Song of Solomon*, “had never felt…as though he belonged anyplace or to anybody” (293). In *Beloved,*
Sethe’s recurring sense of homelessness is linked to her wandering, almost nomadic, thought-processes: “my mind was homeless then…I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace” (204). These narratives suggest a sense of “double consciousness” (Du Bois), as a kind of racialised official language internalised by many of the black characters, which introduces a recurring sense of displacement in Morrison’s novels. The rigid boundaries of the ideal or normative domestic space are drawn by the “definers”; “defined” characters (Beloved 190), it seems, are left with only a paradoxical sense of homelessness, even within their own homes.

Morrison’s fiction explores competing desires for comforting self-enclosure in the home, at the same time as an impulse to break out from confining domestic interiors. On one level, the home provides a kind of sanctuary, stasis and comforting fixity of identity. In Song of Solomon, Macon Dead equates ownership of property with ownership of identity; he instructs his son: “own things…then you’ll own people too” (59). Yet for Milkman, this apparent liberation serves only to imprison his father (and his entire family) in a system of capitalist ideals which is at once isolating and constraining: “owning, building, acquiring…he distorted his life, bent it for the sake of gain” (300). In Beloved, Morrison suggests that these same discourses of property and homeliness were appropriated as tools of brutal oppression by nineteenth century slave-owners. When Schoolteacher arrives at “Sweet Home,” he sets about a process of “domesticating” the slaves. Schoolteacher’s de-humanisation of Sethe resonates with Frederick Douglass’s 1855 description of the commodification of human life, in which he describes himself as being “introduced as…a piece of ‘property’” (qtd. in Russell and Vagner 24). Morrison both employs and subverts this language of ownership and the notion of the home as a protective utopia, exposing the brutal exclusion and violence at the heart of this classic ideal. The false rhetoric of the home is captured in the misnomer “Sweet Home”; Paul D. suggests the hypocrisy of Garner’s “benevolent slavery”: “it wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (14). In disrupting this idealised, euphemistic naming, Paul D.
highlights the socially, culturally constructed nature of this homeliness. At “Sweet Home” the boundaries of identity, and even humanity, are demarcated by literal domestic boundaries: “one step off the ground [of Garner’s plantation] and they were trespassers among the human race” (125).

In both Song of Solomon and Beloved, Morrison links domestic interiors to a sense of stasis and fixed identity. This is exemplified by suffocating atmosphere of the Dead household in Song of Solomon in which Milkman’s confinement in oppressive familial and domestic structures is specifically linked to his sense of bodily constraint: “I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package” (125). Beloved depicts the extremes of this theme of enclosure, through the physically and mentally crippling confinement of slavery. Paul D. finds himself incarcerated in the hell of “Sweet Home” where his bodily confinement is linked to an imprisoning temporal stasis: “time didn’t pass” (244). This brutal physical confinement leads to a parallel closing up of interior, psychological spaces, as Paul D. locks away his emotions and traumatic memories in “that tobacco tin buried in his chest…its lid rusted shut” (73). Even within the apparently liberated space of Baby Suggs’s home, Sethe is plagued by a recurring fear of suffocation. Her sense of domestic confinement is extended into a recurring imagery of asphyxiation: “the voices that ringed 124 like a noose” (183). Protection from the threatening fluidity frequently comes at the expense of a claustrophobic and sterile self-enclosure.

The novels both set up but also undermine conventional idealisations of the home as a protective, utopian space. In Beloved, Amy’s song seems to voice a wider dream in its depiction of a journey from a mysterious, threatening exterior to a protected domestic interior: “through the muck and mist and gloom, to our quiet and cozy home” (81). Yet, Morrison suggests a fundamental unnaturalness at the heart of the most apparently “natural” conventional homeliness. In Song of Solomon, the conventional “two point four” family
model becomes a site of misery, oppression and mistreatment. “Natural” processes, such as breast-feeding or grieving, become de-naturalised in the Dead family home. Ruth attempts to artificially prolong her role as mother (breastfeeding her son until he is in adolescence) and daughter (refusing to accept her father’s death). She desperately struggles to deny the progress of time and to re-affirm her identity according to a conception of her fixed domestic role.

In this way, Morrison challenges conventional family models (defined by their gender balance and heterosexuality) as a normative ideal through the depiction of counter-families, replacing the conventional patriarchal figurehead with a strong matriarchal presence. There is a recurring motif of the three-woman household in Morrison’s novels: Pilate, Hagar and Reba in *Song of Solomon*; Sethe, Denver and Beloved in *Beloved*; Connie, Pallas and Mavis in *Paradise*; Christine, Heed and Junior in *Love*. Unlike the closed doors, fixed boundaries and psychological repressions of traditional homes, many of these all–female households are characterised by a sense of literal and metaphorical openness, affection and honesty. In contrast to the locked doors and rattling keys of the Dead household, for example, the boundaries of Pilate’s home in *Song of Solomon* are marked out by their permeability (the doors are never locked). Similarly, the narrator in *Paradise* highlights a natural free-flow between inside and outside in the convent: “a breeze swept through the kitchen door” (40). Paradoxically, this greater (architectural) openness inspires Mavis with a reassuring sense of protection: “here in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her” (41).

In this context, Nancy Jesser’s distinction between “soft” and ‘hard” boundaries in *Beloved* seems applicable to many of Morrison’s novels. She argues that “places in *Beloved* are made hard discursively and architecturally, marked off by the law, walls or armed guards. They can also be made open: fluid, dynamic and partially or temporarily invisible to the law” (1). The transition between these two states is charted over the course of the novel as Morrison explores ‘interactions between spaces…the processes of their hardening or
softening” (1). The intrusion of forces from outside into supposedly sacred, interior spaces brings about a “breaking up” (*Beloved* 97) of the boundaries, triggering a process of hardening or softening and a destabilising blurring between inside and outside, past and present. *Beloved* is concerned with the violation of sacred, interior spaces on many different levels: physical (Sethe’s rape at Sweet Home), psychological (through haunting memories) and domestic. Schoolteacher’s intrusion into 124 leads to a fundamental disintegration, softening and blurring of the boundaries of the home but also of the self. The attack exposes their domestic and personal vulnerability to invasion from forces from the past. It disrupts Baby Suggs’s sense of security, but also undermines the identity as a protector and spiritual leader that she has constructed: “the heart that pumped out love, that mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came right on into her yard anyway” (180).

Edward Said suggests a wider principle of “intrusion” in which “a tale becomes that long, extended moment when past and present are brought together and allowed to interact” (93). In this sense, the literal intrusions in Morrison’s novels are enacted in disruptions or ruptures in the surface of the narrative. In *Beloved*, there are frequent shifts between different narrative perspectives and timescales, as snippets of memory from the past “intrude” upon the present. 124 shifts from being an open and buzzing nexus of the community to an alienated outpost after “the misery” through a process of hardening domestic, bodily and emotional boundaries. Denver, Sethe and Baby Suggs react to the trauma of the infanticide through a voluntary withdrawal into domestic isolation: Baby Suggs retires to bed “just grieving and thinking about colors” (209) while Sethe insists that “there is no world outside my door” (184). Denver’s self-enclosure in 124 is specifically linked to her (temporary) sensory isolation: “Denver’s hearing, cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear” (103) and her denial of the past: “the present alone interested Denver” (119). Many of Morrison’s characters, it seems, respond to these intrusions through both an internal and external
solidification of the boundaries of the home, but also of the body itself. After “the misery,” for example, Sethe’s body becomes characterised by its death-like rigidity; her numbing state of perpetual present is mirrored in the image of her limbs, frozen “like rigor mortis” (153). The solidification of the boundaries of the house suggests a psychological and emotional confinement; both repression and denial.

Morrison explores the potential for a communal re-drawing of lines between inside and outside, self and other, as a response to these traumatic intrusions. In Beloved, the community’s withdrawal from 124 after the infanticide marks a wider retreat into a state of denial (of complicity in the murder). The narrator frequently returns to descriptions of the abandoned house, a point of contrast between past and present: the “fence which someone was always latching and unlatching in the time when 124 was busy as a way station” was “pulled down…leaving 124 desolate and exposed” (163). After “the misery” the boundaries of the domestic space become re-aligned. Schoolteacher’s intrusion exposes the vulnerability of 124 to attack (given the community’s failure to warn Baby Suggs of the portentous approach of the four horsemen). In contrast to the openness and permeability of the domestic boundaries before the infanticide, the arrival of Beloved leads to a sense of suffocating constriction from the inside: “there was no room for any other thing or body” (39). The process of hardening, it seems, is finally complete, as Sethe’s body is ossified, “there was no entry now. No crack or crevice available…she had taken pains to keep them out” (188).

This hardening of boundaries suggests a struggle to re-assert order, to delineate the lines between inside and outside, past and present, self and other, in order to fix identity. Yet, at the same time, this is undermined by a simultaneous softening, a threatening free-flow between past and present which many of the characters struggle to avoid. In Beloved, Denver echoes this anxiety; her fear of the outside increasingly shifts to an acknowledgement that what lurks on the inside is most disturbing. She declares herself “frightened…by the thing in
Sethe that could come out” (242). Often, it seems that the most familiar domestic settings become the site of the most strange and unnatural presences in Morrison’s writing, as many of the houses that she depicts are characterised by haunting memories. This is most strikingly played out in the ambiguous figure of Beloved, but also in the myth of the headless bride that Sethe recalls in Sweet Home. Homes become “fixed containers for memory” (Jesser 2), ranging from the haunting presence of Ruth’s deceased father in the Dead household to the uncanny appearance of the enchanting figure of Beloved.

The domestic space therefore becomes a focal point for the re-playing of trauma and re-construction of memories. Sethe equates “rememory” with a kind of re-enactment, meaning that while a house can be destroyed, the haunting conception of home that it represents cannot: “If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world” (16). This blurring between picturing and reality, past and presents suggests that the familiarity of the home becomes uncanny when it returns in the dream-like form of a rememory. Bodwin registers the haunting quality of 124; the narrator offers a passing insight into his consciousness: “the place continued to surface in his dreams” (260). Moreover, Sethe hints at a wider conception of history as cyclical. Despite her desperate struggle to “keep the past at bay” (42), she is never able to fix her memories of home at a comfortable distance in the past: “if you go there and stand where it was, it will happen again” (42). “L.” a central narrator in Love, echoes this paradoxical consciousness of memories of the home in a perpetual state of flux, triggering an unavoidable return of the familiar: “Then home: a familiar place that, when you left, kept changing behind your back” (86).

The disintegration of the fixed lines of the home creates a destabilising sense of suspension between past and present, in which both readers and characters remain in a state of uncertainty. Morrison suggests a focal point for this ambivalence through the representation
of liminal, transitional spaces in the novels: “along the community’s and household’s edges...transformations and undoings occur” (Jesser 10). In *Beloved*, it is in the liminal space of the porch, between the inside and the outside, that Sethe first encounters Paul D. and the ambiguous figure of Beloved. Similarly, the Clearing functions both as a protected enclosure, “an emerald closet” (37) of trees, and a space which allows a liberating fluidity of movement and identity. It is described in terms of literal and emotional openness and release associated with the outside: “a wide-open place, cut deep in the woods nobody knew” (87). Natural, social and even linguistic laws seem to be suspended in the descriptions, as there is a merging of genders, social roles, bodies and pronouns: “laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it all got mixed up. Women got crying and men danced” (103). This creates a destabilising “two-world condition,” in which both the characters and readers share in a wider state of “hesitation between a natural explanation of events and a supernatural one” (Todorov 95). This state of literal and metaphorical suspension, of the laws of time, grammar and even gravity, calls into question the strict demarcation between inside and outside, past and present. Liminal spaces emerge as pivotal sites of transition in the novels, as Morrison’s works renegotiate the boundaries of both the home and the narrative itself.

**Journeying and the Re-writing of Identity**

*Beloved* plays out this sense of the uncanny, irrepresible return of the familiar, that recurs in Morrison’s writing. In her description of Sweet Home, Sethe voices this sense that, “It’s where we were...it comes back whether we want it to or not” (14). Just as the home, which initially appears as the most protective of spaces, becomes the site for the most uncanny, disturbing memories and violent acts, Morrison also undermines dreams of a new, undiscovered homeland. During his years of journeying, Paul D. is sustained by dreams of the
“Magical North.” Amy Denver suggests that an idealised image of Boston as a safe haven is passed down through the generations: “Boston’s the place to be in. That’s where my mother was before she was gave to Mr Buddy” (80). Morrison highlights the importance of this process of transmission of dreams and myths, crucial to the formation of individual and communal identity, through an oral tradition of story-telling, folklore and song. Both Denver and Beloved question Sethe about her past homes, illustrating an irrepressible craving for these narratives of journeying and home. Amy Gottfried suggests a wider sense in which American history can itself be seen as “a conjunction of journeying, arrival and history” (59), often to an idealised, plentiful and protective space that fails to materialise. Frequently, journeying into a utopian domestic space becomes a structure for dreaming in the novels, Sing meets her husband on ‘a wagon full of ex-slaves going to a promised land” (*Song of Solomon* 244). Christine in *Love* makes this parallel specific: “the road formed the structure for her dream life” (82).

At the same time as employing this classic motif, Morrison re-transcribes these familiar, mythologised journeys. *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* suggest the problematic nature of existence upon arrival at these idealised destinations, illustrating the isolation through divisions, for example, between the liberated Baby Suggs and the rest of the community. Perhaps most uncanny and frightening of all, is the return of familiar American ideals, values which are held closest to home (the conventional family structure, for example), are made strange in Morrison’s fiction. Baby Suggs suggests the sense in which the home becomes a site for the return for repressed memories as a national, as well as individual condition: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5). Reassuring, conventional notions of both home and homeland become destabilised, as the ghostly presences suggest a traumatic personal past but also a wider, haunting legacy of slavery in American history.
Morrison highlights how slaves are denied the narratives of home which are fundamental to the construction of both individual and communal identity. Sethe’s memories of life before Sweet Home are shrouded in a literal and metaphorical semi-darkness; she associates her mother with the few moments they were able to spend together at twilight. Snippets of apparently “homely” memories are constantly tinged with a sense of curtailment. Both memories and bodies bear the scars of slavery: Sethe recalls Nan’s “one good arm and half of another” (62). Repressions and absences in memory are reproduced through gaps on the page. Moreover, Sethe becomes cut off from her own memories of the past through a linguistic barrier: “what Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in” (62). Milkman echoes this sense of experiencing home as a silence or ellipsis, as he laments “the gap in his childhood” (299). Morrison suggests this frightening return of the past across the generations as the infanticide committed by Sethe’s mother, is played out in Sethe’s own “rough choice.” For Sethe, the act of listening to her story possesses a strange familiarity as well as a fragmented, elliptical quality. As readers, with an overview of the recurring generational patterns and the frequent re-playing of a single traumatic event, we share in Sethe’s uncanny sense that “she was remembering something she forgot she knew” (61).

Nomadic Narratives

_Song of Solomon_ and _Beloved_ both depict nomadic characters, through meandering, non-linear narrative forms. This sense of rootlessness provides a liberating anonymity and freedom from constraining familial structures for these characters. Paul D suggests nomadism as the most basic reaction to the brutal confinement of slavery: “If a negro’s got legs he ought to use them. Sit down for too long, somebody will figure a way to tie them up” (10). Even in the comparative freedom of the later timeframe of _Song of Solomon_, Guitar rebels against the
imprisoning conceptions of homeliness and identity by becoming a streetwise, urban nomad: “Guitar, a habitual street roamer, believed he knew every public thing going on in the city” (50). Yet, this kind of journeying is also equated with a paralysing social invisibility. The fragmented anonymity of this nomadic lifestyle is reflected in the disjointed mode of description. For Paul D. life becomes stripped away to a matter of bare survival: “Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on” (66). The proliferation of verbs suggests a need for constant action, almost as a resistance to reflective introspection, to hide not only from public gaze but also private self-scrutiny. Morrison’s critical writing suggests that this severing of the bond between individual and community, past and present, serves not as a form of liberation, but rather creates a vulnerable rootlessness and disorientation. In her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1980), she calls for a culturally, historically and physically contextualised approach to identity, literature and history: “if we don’t keep in contact with the ancestor…we are, in fact, lost” (344).

Nomadism becomes at once theme and narrative process in Song of Solomon and Beloved. The journeying of the characters is mirrored in the circling of the narrative perspective over the same memories or piece of ground: Milkman laments “I’m tired…tired of running up and down these streets and getting nowhere” (120). Sethe’s insistence that ‘the past is something to leave behind” (256) is undermined by the structure of the novel itself; the impression of momentary glimpses of the past in the present is reproduced in the fragmentation of the narrative. The sense of endless spirals of narration is suggested on two levels in the character of Beloved’s fragmented interior monologue. Her comment that “there is no place where I stop” (210) suggests at once the ambiguous fluidity of the boundaries of her identity and body, but also her unpunctuated mode of expression. (There is no “stop” provided in punctuation, rather a continuous flow of text, an on-going stream of consciousness as the snippets of text and memory hang suspended on the page.) Morrison
subverts any expectation of a construction of meaning through the sense of an ending, on the level of sentence structure but also in the multiple journeys without destinations. An analogy emerges between the processes of reading and remembering as a kind of reconstruction, linked in Morrison’s definition of “re-memory”: “an active act of selection, denial, creation...more than just recollection” (‘BBC R4 Interview’). The surface of the narrative becomes ruptured by these repressions in memory and language that serve “to enact grammatically a mental journey into a misty and potentially painful past” (Cowart 91). Readers are drawn into a complicity in the reconstruction of these personal and narrative journeys, creating a dialogical relationship between “tellers and listeners” in which, as Peter Brooks argues, the reader is “solicited not only to understand the story, but also to complete it” (260).

*Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* fundamentally challenge notions of progress, chronology or linearity implicit in the notion of a journey through the meandering, fragmented trajectories of the narratives themselves. The novels are littered with failed journeys, false quests and disrupted attempts at home-making. Milkman’s central quest for identity is paralleled by Ruth, Pilate, Hagar and Guitar, all of whom pursue journeys of their own. Moreover, the central quest of the entire novel, of Guitar and Milkman, begins a false quest for the lost gold of the family inheritance. Yet, as this journey becomes re-directed and re-defined, the conventional motif of a quest for buried treasure yields a more valuable self-knowledge: “Milkman recovers a ‘treasure’ in the form of a lost past, a lost myth, a lost name” (Cowart 90). Initially, Sethe struggles to fulfill a fantasy of homeliness in the oppressive framework of Sweet Home by re-constructing rituals: she sews a wedding dress for her first night with Halle and decorates Mrs Garner’s kitchen. Yet, in hindsight, Sethe condemns this attempt at home-making as a fragile self-delusion: ‘as though Sweet Home really was one. As though a handful of myrtle...in a white woman’s kitchen could make it
hers” (23). The absurdity of this image suggests the limited potential for resistance against the brutal oppression of slavery from inside the home. Through failed, dead-end quests and stunted growth in domestic confined spaces, Morrison suggests the importance of breaking out of oppressive interiors to discover new modes of journeying in the search for identity.

Morrison offers an alternative model to this silent, small-scale resistance within the home or anonymous (almost invisible) nomadic existence, through a decisive act of breaking out of domestic confinement into natural surroundings. Alongside the claustrophobic interiors and failed quests, Beloved and Song of Solomon also depict journeys which are linked to forward movement, progress and story-telling. The moment when Denver steps off the porch is, for example, a climatic turning point of Beloved. The intense focus of the narration lends an apocalyptic significance to the moment: “she would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world” (243). In the liminal space of the porch, poised between inside and outside, natural and supernatural worlds, Denver is visited by Baby Suggs’s ghost. This ambivalent voice from the past specifically links domestic confinement with a comforting state of ignorance and denial: “You don’t remember nothing….is that why you can’t walk down the steps?” (244). Confrontation with the dark, unknown outside world is directly linked to confrontation with the traumas of the past. Baby Suggs urges Denver to break out of passive denial and stasis to journey into the outside world and her own past: “Know it and go on into the yard. Go on” (214). In stepping out of 124, Denver crosses an invisible threshold and instigates a rite of passage. The process of gathering together lost names and histories endows Denver with a new-found power of self-definition: “the trail she followed…was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others” (248). Rushdy emphasises the significance of Denver’s initial route to Lady Jones’s house, back to the place where she was educated: “those paper scraps represent her place in history – both within the family as a literate daughter of an unlettered mother and within the culture as a remembered being” (582).
The journey triggers a process of personal re-construction on Denver’s part, but also suggests a wider analogy with the process of reading the novel itself: both readers and characters become engaged in a process of piecing together a narrative from snippets of memory, glimpses of scenes and fragments of text.

Journeying here becomes associated with literal but also linguistic agency. By breaking out of domestic confinement, Denver not only acquires the power to remember and “write” her own identity, but also the power to tell her own story. She is struck by the realisation that: ‘nobody was going to help her unless she told it – all of it” (253). Her escape from domestic confinement is directly linked to her release from the sensory isolation of deafness: “Last time…words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind” (252). Through this process of “opening out,” she exchanges the static silence of the domestic interior for a recognition of the need for an active dialogue with community. Denver’s journey out of the home in Beloved establishes a dialogue with parallel journeys in Morrison’s other novels, such as Junior’s journey out of the poor neighbourhood of her childhood in Love, or Sweetie’s escape from a prolonged period of self-imposed domestic confinement in Paradise. Morrison sets up both intratextual and intertextual dialogues, as multiple journeys and motifs co-exist and compete in her novels. It seems that she self-consciously draws upon a tradition of story-telling in which journeying provides both a theme and a trigger for the narrative. Denver’s process of following “the trail…made up of paper scraps” (248) suggests not only a journey into her own personal past, but also a gathering together of snippets of slave narrative, song, folkloric myth and epic. Readers are led on a fragmented journey back through a landscape of literary motifs, akin to the model of history put forward in Morrison’s early editorial project at Random House, The Black Book (1974): a kind of ‘scrapbook” which invited readers through a “folk journey” (“Introduction” i) through African American history.
made up of snippets of play bills, advertisements, newspaper articles, dream interpretations, letters, speeches, drawings, recipes, children’s rhymes, spirituals, blues and folk songs.

The sense of many mythical journeys and dreams of escape underlying the central quest is a striking feature of both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. The importance of journeying back through history, highlighted by Milkman’s genealogical quest, is also played out in the journey back into a literary past. Davis describes how, “Milkman’s life follows the pattern of the classic hero, from miraculous birth….through quest-journey to final reunion with his double” (34). In *Beloved*, Morrison re-writes this male-centered epic quest with a female protagonist, merging a traditional quest-motif with the popular form of the ghost story. This destabilising generic blurring and layering of narratives is compounded by the echoes of slave narrative and songs, self-consciously re-called in the ironic naming of the “Garners” of Sweet Home.¹ The narratives unravel to reveal many generic and mythical strands, as Morrison seeks a new form, a re-definition of heroism and a “myth adequate to experience” (Davis 27).

**Myths of Confinement and Escape**

Myths of flight in *Song of Solomon* encapsulate a wider, recurring dream of escape from domestic and bodily confinement. The circularity of the narrative can be traced through a return to this theme of flight from the opening, suicidal leap of Smith, to Milkman’s final jump from the cliff. Pilate’s gesture towards the sky is a pivotal moment in the novel, paralleling Denver’s first step off the porch in *Beloved*, as both mark an epiphanic realisation of the possibility of breaking out of the home. For the first time, Milkman recognises the complex relationship between journeying and belonging; Pilate “had shown him the sky…so

¹ The name Garner recalls the enslaved woman Margaret Garner whose biography provided a source for the infanticide story in *Beloved*. In the novel, her surname is ironically transferred to the slave owners.
that from then on when he looked at it, it had no distance, no remoteness, but was intimate, familiar, like a room he lived in, a place where he belonged” (210). These flights become a site of convergence for classical motifs (the Icarus tale), folkloric icons (“the Flying African”) and personal ambition. Yet, at the same time, the flights of Smith, Milkman and Solomon suggest the problematic morality of these traditional myths. Morrison highlights how these (apparently idealistic) myths of flight, imply an unspoken abandonment of women. Morrison explores the fate of those left behind: Ryna, Sing, Pilate and Hagar. This pattern is reproduced over the generations: just as Jake flies away and leaves Sing, Hagar is abandoned by Milkman. The narration of this episode emphasises the ironic simultaneity of events with a bold, brutal rhyme: “While Milkman was flying, Hagar was dying” (332). Morrison renders the dream of flight, as well as the utopian home at the end of this journey, problematic, posing the moral dilemma of the sense in which, on both literal and metaphorical levels, “you can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (*Song of Solomon* 149).

Morrison therefore suggests a problematic moral and social conflict underlying these traditional mythical, classical and folkloric fantasies of transcendence and escape. Both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* play out the impossibility of complete escape from the body, from the home or from the past. Instead, Morrison suggests the need to undertake difficult, painful and often highly physical struggles. Amy Denver describes story-telling as a painful, uncanny return of the familiar: “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (35). Rushdy describes how “re-memory” functions at once as ‘both a resurrection and a pain”(576). The tortuous physical dimension to these struggles, such as Sethe’s de-humanising journey slithering on her stomach through the forest, serves only to emphasise the highly painful nature of this process of self-definition. Physical impairments to journeying, such as Sethe’s pregnancy or Milkman’s wounded feet, mirror the obstacles to progress posed by repressions in memory and the fragmented process of storytelling.
For Milkman, journeying out of the home leads to a new sense of belonging. The narrator draws attention to the significance of journey as process: “he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged to it” (281). It seems that journeying softens the boundaries between individual home and community, self and other, leading to a greater sense of connection. This complex relationship between the softening yet strengthening of bonds is captured in the image of a living, pulse-like connection to the community and surrounding landscape: “he felt connected, as though were some cord or pulse of information they shared” (293). Morrison suggests a literal, as well as metaphorical sense in which Milkman gains a new natural “rootedness” through his journey: “his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of the body that extended…into the soil, and were comfortable there” (281). Rather than a leap of divine transcendence, it is the earthy, physical struggle through the dense undergrowth (and corresponding search for genealogical “roots”) which is most significant to Milkman’s process of development. Over the course of the novel, the focus is subtly shifted from the idealised flight of Solomon to the responsible journeying of Pilate: “without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (335).

*Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* both capture a series of competing impulses, playing out a tension between journeying and comforting domestic enclosure, remembering and forgetting, story-telling and silence, escapist flight and rooting identity in a genealogical past. Progress, it seems, can only come through journeying back through history. Davis describes this paradoxical state: “Only in commitment is Milkman free”(35). In her fictional and critical writing, Morrison asserts the importance of journeying out of individual isolation in order to engage in communal dialogues, to articulate even the most traumatic events: “no experience should be beyond the reaches of language” (Morrison “BBC R4 Interview”). In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests the need to tell these unspoken stories and to place them in dialogue with each other: Paul D. returns to Sethe to “put his story next to hers” (273), “her story was more
bearable because it was his as well” (99). Moreover, the novels themselves engage in a similar process of placing multiple (mythical, historical, fictional) narratives of journeys in dialogic relationship. For Rushdy, *Beloved* is “the establishment of a communal narrative” marked by a sense of repetition and continuity: “the very enactment of an on-going generational oral transmission” (591). The image of the open-ended journey therefore becomes a powerful symbol of Morrison’s aesthetic: Milkman’s climactic leap yields a whole new set of beginnings, just as *Sula* defies conventional linearity and closure, in its final image of “circles and circles of sorrow” (149).

Yet *Beloved* ends with a closing up and hardening of boundaries. Sethe’s withdrawal into the home mirrors a wider communal retreat into silence: “this is not a story to pass on” (275). This shift towards domestic self-enclosure can be traced as a wider pattern in Morrison’s fiction over the course of her career. While *Song of Solomon* ends with a liberating leap outwards into the natural sphere, *Love* concludes with an entropic fall downwards, as Christine and Heed remain imprisoned in a continued domestic enclosure.

This failure to pass on stories and to journey out of oppressive domestic environments in *Love* could be linked to Morrison’s disillusionment with an alienated modern condition. After the September 11th attacks, Morrison famously objected to the commercial impulse behind President Bush’s injunction to the public to ‘go out to the store.’” Instead, Morrison connected the failure to “go out into the neighbourhood” (Morrison “BBC R4 Interview”) to tell traumatic stories and share communal living spaces, to a modern condition of apathetic alienation and enclosure. In *Sula*, the narrator draws a contrast between the sense of community 1941 and 1965 contexts: “now there weren’t any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by” (143). In more recent years, this sense of isolation from the local has been complicated and exacerbated by processes of “disembedding” (Giddens) and “deterritorialization” (Tomlinson) connected
to the fragmenting effects of technology and its promotion of virtual, worldwide forms of communication. Morrison insists upon the importance of preserving complex storytelling processes (written and oral) as an antidote to a sound-bite culture in which individual identities become subsumed into a wider, globalised narrative. In “Rootedness,” she echoes this view that an isolated, individualistic outlook is both reflected in and fundamentally connected to a shift in domestic spaces: “we don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago” (340).

Narrative processes are linked to spatial formations in Morrison’s novels and, in her critical writing, spatial metaphors are also central to her thinking. The aim of representing the unrepresented is conveyed through metaphors of unearthing buried or unspoken stories: “bit by bit I had been rescuing her [Beloved] from the grave of time and inattention” (“A Conversation” 585). Yet, this unearthing is matched by a parallel sense of re-growth and fertile re-imagination. Morrison searches for new literary spaces and dialogic narrative forms in which the novel represents a site for these scenes for communal story-telling. For Rushdy, Morrison enacts this story-telling performatively, creating a kind of “oral literature” (587). In the insistence upon the need to break out of oppressive domestic confinement, she “calls for an end to the Ellisonian inertia” (Dixon 24) and invisibility, suggesting the fundamental importance of journeying, story-telling and remembering. Morrison’s novels dramatise the damaging effects of an exclusion from home-making, a sense that “there’s no place like home,” but also suggest the need to look beyond individual domestic units to establish wider, communal narratives. In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison engages in a re-negotiation of both spatial and narrative boundaries, re-writing idealised narratives of the home and classic journeying motifs in the on-going search for new “places and spaces so that the reader can participate” (“Rootedness”341).
Works Cited


