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Lorie Watkins Fulton

University of Southern Mississippi

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Hiding Fire and Brimstone in Lacy Groves: The Twinned Trees of *Beloved*

Toni Morrison fills each of her novels with an abundance of natural imagery, but her fifth novel, *Beloved*, seems particularly grounded in metaphors drawn from the natural world. In an interview with Jane Bakerman in 1977, Morrison talked about the importance she attaches to the use of such metaphors:

In language all you have are those 26 letters, some punctuation and some paper. So you have to do everything with just that. A metaphor is a way of seeing something, either familiar or unfamiliar, in a way that you can grasp it. If I get the right one, then I'm all right. But I can't just leap in with the words, I have to get a hook.” (35)

In *Beloved*, Morrison frequently uses the natural image of the tree to “hook” her readers. The centrality of trees to the novel seems evident in that virtually every critic who has put pen to paper concerning *Beloved* offers some interpretation of the scar on Sethe’s back, usually in connection with Paul D’s favorite tree, Brother. These same critics have, however, paid scant attention to other trees in the novel; only Michèle Bonnet has attempted such a comprehensive reading. She centers her analysis in the line that explains how a local sawyer planted roses in his lumberyard to “take the sin out of slicing trees for a living” (*Beloved* 47), and, from that line, develops a complex theory concerning what she terms “the law of the tree.” To oversimplify Bonnet’s argument (albeit only for the sake of expediency), this law basically contends that Morrison’s novel defines “sin” as anything that violates humanity’s natural environment (42). The “most salient” feature of the tree, Bonnet states, lies in its identification with life (42); indeed, she contends, “It is what the tree encloses, Life itself, that is sacred” (44-45).

Ultimately, Bonnet determines that Morrison uses trees as positive symbols, as evidence that “beyond transgression lies regeneration” (53). I would suggest that Morrison also further complicates her use of trees in the novel; regeneration may lie beyond transgression, but Morrison’s tree imagery usually contradicts that regeneration somehow, and trees remain conflicted images throughout her work.¹ She balances every tree like the one that leads Paul D to freedom against another that took the chance for freedom from a dead man who swings from its branches. Even the quotation at the center of Bonnet’s reading seems fundamentally conflicted because the roses that the sawyer plants do not expiate his guilt; rather than creating the “friendly feel” that he aimed for, the roses crawl over everything, and their scent sickens all who pass by them to attend the late summer carnival (*Beloved* 47). Morrison also adds complexity to the tree as a symbol by associating the key issues that each of her characters struggles against with a tree of some kind, and her characters

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¹personal communication to the author.
even become tree-like themselves as they work through these respective issues.

Morrison spoke about her conflation of the human with the natural in an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981 when she described the world of her novels as "an animated world in which trees can be outraged and hurt, and in which the presence or absence of birds is meaningful. You have to be very still to understand these so-called signs, in addition to which they inform you about your own behavior" (100). Morrison's approach, then, seems to alter the ecofeminist belief that the domination of women directly connects to the devastation of the natural environment; rather, her method highlights such a relationship between the natural world and another oppressed group, the enslaved. _Beloved_ accordingly blurs the line between humankind and the natural world that it inhabits; trees resemble people, people resemble trees, and the deepest desires and fears of Morrison's characters become entangled with these metaphors. If, as Morrison suggests, readers look for these signs carefully, they will realize that beyond the transgression and regeneration that Bonnet identifies in Morrison's trees lies a further complexity that sometimes leads back to the negativity implied by transgression, the positive nature of regeneration, or a curious mixture of both.

Although I want to focus on the more obscure tree images within the text, no discussion of trees in _Beloved_ adequately begins without examining the infamous tree on Sethe's back. Critics have interpreted in wildly varying ways the scar that Amy Denver describes with tree-like terms.² The creativity and variety of readings concerning Sethe's scar testify to its mutability as a metaphor that can support dualistic, and even contradictory, interpretations. Characters within the novel even disagree about the scar's appearance. While Amy sees the scar as a "chokecherry tree" (_Beloved_ 79), Paul D refutes that description and refers to the scar as both "the decorative work of an ironsmith" and a "revolting clump of scars" (17, 21). In spite of this basic ambiguity, Morrison's text supports one certainty about the scar: the deadened skin of Sethe's back clearly represents feelings about the past that she refuses to give free reign. When Paul D kisses the scar, Sethe "knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree" (17). Sethe then speculates that perhaps because of Paul D's presence she can now "feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). Sethe's thought does not, as some have suggested, demonstrate that she represses memories of Sweet Home; the novel makes it painfully clear that she remembers everything, but she simply refuses to allow herself to react to those memories.³ In fact, we see Sethe, after she learns of Halle's final insanity, become "resigned to her rebellious brain" as she questions, "Why was there nothing it [her brain] refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?" (70)

The main barrier to Sethe's allowing herself to feel the pain of her past seems rooted in a futile variation of survivor's guilt. When Amy first sees Sethe's scar, she speculates, "What God have in mind, I wonder" (_Beloved_ 79), and her query prompts Sethe to wonder the same thing (80). In trying to make sense of a senseless act of violence, Sethe apparently convinces herself on some level that she must have deserved what happened to her; the unnamed narrator implies that she fears that she contributed to her own abuse. This feeling of responsibility manifests itself in another tree metaphor, the ink that Sethe makes for schoolteacher from "cherry gum and oak bark" (6). More than anything, Sethe resents schoolteacher's identifica-
tion of what he terms her “animal” characteristics, and she cannot help but feel that she facilitated her abuse by making the ink he used to record those characteristics. At the novel’s end, she remains obsessed by the belief that schoolteacher could not have kept such a record if she “hadn’t made the ink” with which he wrote (271). Morrison shows Sethe as a woman who essentially feels that her small act helped to plant that tree on her back, regardless of the near-certainty that Mrs. Garner would have prepared the ink had Sethe not; after all, as instructed, Sethe mixed it using Mrs. Garner’s recipe. And Morrison extends the effects of Sethe’s scar beyond her own experience with yet another symbolic tree. In a passage of free indirect discourse that seems voiced by both Stamp Paid and the narrator of the novel, Morrison writes that the 19th-century US racial conflict stems not from the jungles of Africa, but from “the jungle whitefolks planted in them [slaves]. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one” (198-99). Sethe’s scar, a tree “planted,” as Amy says, by the boy who whipped Sethe (79), simply must physically represent the tangled jungle that, rooted inside of each slave, grows to touch even the masters who created it.

Morrison develops Sethe as a woman whose fears about facilitating her own abuse are unfounded, a woman who has no clue that killing her own daughter extends the legacy of pain represented by the tree on her back. When Sethe first hears schoolteacher instructing his nephews in the pseudo-scientific method of aligning the so-called human with the animal characteristics of slaves, she “bumped up against a tree” and her head “itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp” (Beloved 193). The importance of this sensation becomes clear when schoolteacher arrives at 124 Bluestone to reclaim Sethe and her children as his property. Sethe recognizes his hat and again “heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple” (163). By the logic of her own metaphor, Sethe becomes an extension of the tree that she bumped into when she first overheard schoolteacher’s lesson, becomes a metaphorical tree attacked by the hummingbirds that cause her to shut down all thought and simply act. The language of the novel also supports the construction of Sethe as a tree when Stamp Paid thinks that Sethe “split to the woodshed to kill her children” (158). As Stamp’s observation unwittingly indicates, Sethe’s act certainly “splits” her on some level, and, almost as if in sympathy, the stump of the butternut tree in the yard of 124 “split like a fan” at some point after the murder to mark her psychic, emotional break (258).

If any redemptive possibility exists in this novel concerning Sethe, it lies in the potential for her healing at the novel’s end. When the women of the community come to rescue Sethe, she associates the ceremony with Baby Suggs’s liberating calling in the Clearing:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The narrator suggests that this ceremony possibly does fundamentally change Sethe, because when she sees Mr. Bodwin ride into the yard of 124 directly after it and mistakes him for schoolteacher, she reenacts the most significant memory of her past quite differently. This time, when she feels the “hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair” (262), she attempts to attack not
the girl she believes to be her daughter, but the man she thinks has come to take her child. Sethe makes what seems to be a more logical choice this time; however, whether this experience will help to heal her remains quite uncertain.

Sethe’s best hope for such healing lies perhaps in her renewed connection with Paul D, a sexual relationship initiated, incidentally, by his exploration of her tree-like scar. He attempts to console Sethe in the final pages and to convince her of her own worth, that she is her own “best thing” (Beloved 273). While her questioning response of “Me? Me?” renders her position unclear, the natural imagery of this passage offers a small clue to her fate. Sethe lies in her bed “under a quilt of merry colors” just as Baby Suggs did before she died (271). Natural destruction fills Sethe’s house as “cans jammed with the rotting stems of things,” and “blossoms shriveled like sores” lie amongst the dead ivy that twines through the scene (270). In the midst of this display of natural death, only Sethe seems alive as her “hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow” (271). So the hope does exist, but Morrison refuses to reveal whether Sethe has begun to heal or whether, as she lies under the quilt singing of lambswool and jackweed much as Baby speculated about color in her last days, she simply waits to die.

Morrison further complicates the question of whether or not the redemption that Sethe associates with the Clearing can save her by making the Clearing itself a location of decided ambiguity. Baby’s chosen place of worship brings to mind the sacred groves of African religions in which different tribes worship trees that serve as sacred signs for the founded communities (Kimambo and Omari 114-15). Bonnet notes such a connection and demonstrates that Morrison ascribes a similar power to Baby Suggs’s grove (43). Linden Peach likewise reads the Clearing as a symbol of healing and even contends that the message Baby preaches there “is the really important text which lies buried in this novel” (110). Yet, as Susan Corey shows, Morrison always undercuts “the positive with the negative,” as she does when some spiritual manifestation, possibly of Sethe’s dead daughter, attacks and chokes Sethe in the Clearing (41). As Nancy Jesser puts it, “the Clearing—the place of enchantment and release—is also a place of dangerous flux” (333). In fact, the enchantment of the Clearing ultimately renders the site most dangerous, for there, Sethe becomes convinced that Beloved embodies the spirit of her murdered child. As Sethe leaves the Clearing after first suspecting that Beloved is her daughter, she notes that the place looks the same, “but with a difference” (Beloved 98). The difference is Sethe’s newfound belief that Beloved is her murdered daughter incarnate. Although Morrison writes that Sethe’s “suspicion that the girl’s touch was also exactly like the baby’s ghost dissipated,” Sethe also wants to get back to 124 quickly, ostensibly to “set these idle girls to some work that would fill their wandering heads” (99). Actually, the narrator reveals, Sethe seeks to distract herself with thoughts of what to prepare for Paul D’s dinner, and even though she judges her suspicion about Beloved to be “only a tiny disturbance anyway—not strong enough to divert her from the ambition welling in her now” (99), the suspicion persists.

Sethe finally gives way to those suspicions during the ice skating episode in another clearing that seems
to mirror the Clearing, the sacred place where Baby Suggs preaches. On the afternoon during which Beloved finds the mismatched ice skates, Sethe decides to take Baby’s advice and “lay it all down.” The three women spend the rest of the day skating on a nearby frozen creek while the “live oak and soughing pine on the banks enclosed them and absorbed their laughter” (174). Morrison hints at the destructive spiral awaiting Sethe by interspersing this seemingly celebratory outing with the ominous refrain, “Nobody saw them falling” (174-75). Indeed, Sethe does begin to fall prey here to her suspicions about Beloved, and Morrison describes those beliefs with another tree-centered metaphor that sustains the theme of enchantment. After Sethe becomes convinced that Beloved is her daughter, she describes her dawning realization as a “hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow” (176), something very similar to an object that a character in a fairy tale might discover. Morrison’s tale of Sethe’s near-destruction that follows, however, inverts the fairy-tale notion of the enchanted clearing as a place of healing to turn it into a site of delusion. And although it hardly seems a pleasant prospect, the delusional nature of this clearing has implications for the Clearing, Baby’s place of worship. Perhaps in the end, Baby was right, and “There was no grace—imaginary or real—and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that” (89).

Baby passes on her connection with nature to her granddaughter Denver, who plays in a “tree room,” a protective bower that, as Marc Conner notes, becomes “a shelter where her loneliness will be eased” (65). Bonnet asserts that much like Baby’s Clearing, “Denver’s bower is similarly endowed with a nurturing, healing, rejuvenating power” (42). Denver’s bower likewise connects to African religious traditions, but in a much different way than does Baby’s Clearing. In African Traditions and Philosophy, John Mbiti describes the centrality of trees to rites of sexual passage; indeed, the Akamba tribe even gives young males “special sticks” with which they “perform symbolic sexual acts” upon the girls of the tribe (124). In the tree room, Denver takes Baby’s message of loving one’s own body quite literally and becomes comfortable enough to masturbate, to engage in her own solitary right of sexual passage. Denver, perhaps unconsciously, connects her sexuality to her place of refuge when she remembers Baby’s advice, “That I should always listen to my body and love it” and then, in the very next paragraph, begins to talk of her “secret house” (209). While Morrison never makes Denver’s actions within the bower explicit, she encodes them with distinct clues. Always quite secretive about her actions within the “tree room,” Denver reflects that these secrets “were sweet—sweet as lily-of-the-valley cologne” (38). When Denver uses this cologne to scent her tree room, it creates a “signal that thrilled the rabbits before it confused them” (28). Morrison subtly hints at what actually confused the rabbits, animals typically associated with prolific sexual activity, in the next paragraph when, while in the tree room, Denver “was made suddenly cold by a combination of wind and the perfume on her skin. She dressed herself, bent down to leave and stood up in a snowfall” (29). Naked in the tree room, Denver perhaps notices the cold only after masturbating to climax. While this solitary activity temporarily relieves Denver’s loneliness, it also points out that while the hidden room does give her consolation, it also contributes to her isolation. In fact, through the time she spends there after her brothers leave, Denver becomes almost like a solitary tree herself because she “smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night” (19).

What Denver thinks she would willingly give up for Beloved, “the most violent of sunsets, stars as fat as dinner plates and all the blood of autumn,” are actually the isolated joys of the tree room, sights she would have seen there (Beloved 121). Denver trades
these things for the companionship of Beloved, who possibly functions as Morrison's most conflicted manifestation of nature. It seems almost too easy to read Beloved as a metaphorical tree if she does indeed embody the spirit of the daughter that Sethe killed with a saw in an empty woodshed. Bonnet demonstrates that Beloved “is constantly associated with a felled tree” (45), but Morrison also uses living tree images to describe Beloved. While Sethe finds the young woman, as Bonnet notes, sitting on a “stump not far from the steps of 124” (Beloved 50), this scene emphasizes images of life. Like a plant turning toward the light, Beloved sleeps with the sun “full” in her face, and, upon waking, drinks cup after cup of water. Sethe subsequently notices that, almost as if revived by the water, Beloved’s hair “bloomed” from her head after she drinks (51). Before, Beloved seemed almost wilted as her head drooped and her neck “kept bending and her chin brushed the bit of lace edging her dress” (50). Morrison later continues to develop the idea of Beloved’s vitality through plant imagery when Paul D compares her to new strawberry plant, “gilded and shining” (64).

Even though Denver initially connects with Beloved and treats her as a sister from virtually the moment of her arrival, Beloved quickly deserts Denver for an exclusive relationship with Sethe. Morrison writes that Beloved “wanted Sethe’s company for hours to watch the layer of brown leaves waving at them from the bottom of the creek, in the same place where, as a little girl, Denver played in the silence with her. Now the players were altered” (240-41). As the dramatis personae in this performance alter, Beloved seems figuratively to plant herself in Denver’s former spot on the riverbank as she “flattened herself on the ground” and “gazed at her gazing face” beside Sethe’s (241).

The first sign that the community will displace Beloved comes when, in response to Denver’s plea to Lady Jones, the women from the local church begin to leave food for the family on “the tree stump at the edge of the yard” (Beloved 248), quite possibly the same stump that Beloved occupies upon her arrival. After the congregation of 30 women somehow expels Beloved, one of them, Ella, speculates that Beloved “Could be hiding in the trees waiting for another chance” (263). In this respect, Beloved seems linked to the “headless bride” back at Sweet Home who Paul D says used to “roam them woods regular” (13). On an extratextual level, she also seems linked to the misambwa, a group of spirits in some African religions that “have no immediate family ties” and “are associated with natural objects like rocks, streams, trees and animals” (Mbiti 88). The novel’s final lines certainly intimate that like the misambwa, Beloved returns to the creek from which she came: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather” (Beloved 275). What was down there before was Beloved; she entered the novel when she “walked out of the water” (50), and, if Sethe is right that “nothing ever dies” (36), then what the narrator dismisses as “Just weather” and “Certainly no clamor for a kiss” Morrison intimates is Beloved’s spirit, resigned to the nature from which it came (275).

Although Morrison has remarked, “trees have always seemed feminine to me” (“Unspeakable” 25-26), they also play a central role in the novel’s construction of masculinity. Morrison’s men initially seem to have a less complicated relationship with trees than do her women. In fact, Sethe’s fellow slave, Sixo, whom Bonnet reads as “the only truly flawless character in the novel, the African hero and role model,” first introduces us to the novel’s notion of the healing power of trees (42). In
much the same way that Baby dances in the Clearing, Sixo “went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open” (Beloved 25). Sixo also frequently mentally escapes from Sweet Home during the day by watching “the low part [of the sky] where it touched the trees.” When he did that, Sethe says, she knew that “his mind was gone from Sweet Home” (197).

Sixo, a minor character at best, nevertheless becomes a key part of Morrison’s depiction of trees when his death powerfully inverts his affinity for the natural world. Schoolteacher decides to execute Sixo in response to his resistance during his and Paul D’s attempted escape. After determining that Sixo “will never be suitable” as a slave, schoolteacher ties him “at the waist to a tree” and lights a “hickory fire” beneath his feet. Seemingly unaffected, Sixo only laughs as his feet “are cooking” and calls out “Seven-O! Seven-O!” (226). Readers later understand the importance of his call when Paul D reveals that Sixo shouted “Seven-O! because his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed” (Beloved 228-29). If Morrison stopped here, we could definitely say that her male characters fare more successfully in nature than do her female characters. Even though Sixo becomes reduced to the status of a figurative log in a death that perverts his love for nature, he will live on in part because his Thirty-Mile Woman escaped with his child. However, Sixo’s “blossoming seed” also echoes a much more uncertain symbol, the spores of bluefern that grow on the riverbank at Denver’s birth. Morrison writes of the spores:

> Often they are mistook for insects—but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one—will become all of what is contained in the spore; will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that: longer, perhaps, than the spore itself. (84)

Wendy B. Faris contends that the bluefern spores “are analogous to the baby just born [Denver]; they celebrate its birth at the same time that they implicitly lament its decidedly uncertain future” (179). If Morrison characterizes Denver’s birth as uncertain, then readers must regard the future of Sixo’s unborn child as even more doubtful. Although Sixo believes that the Thirty-Mile Woman “got away with his blossoming seed” (Beloved 228-29), readers never again see her after she runs from the scene of Sixo’s death. Morrison leaves her future most uncertain; readers can never know if she beats the odds and escapes like Sethe, or if she suffers a tragic fate similar to that of the anonymous girl whose hair ribbon Stamp Paid finds still clinging to a bit of scalp in the bottom of his flatbed boat. Given the circumstances, the chances that Sixo’s child will live out its days just as Sixo planned seem, at best, slim.

Morrison continues to develop the connection between trees and masculinity through Paul D’s interaction with several trees. The most notable of these, of course, is the tree he calls “Brother,” his anthropomorphic companion at Sweet Home. Critics generally interpret Brother as a nurturing image, often as a counterpart to the destructive tree on Sethe’s back.5 In fact, Andrew Schopp even claims that Paul D cannot see Sethe’s scar as a tree, in part, because of “his own conception of what a tree should be” (221). And for Paul D, trees become what Bonnet describes as places of “safety and refreshment” (43). Trees, Paul D says, “were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted.” He and the other slaves frequently eat and rest beneath Brother’s protective branches, or the branches of another tree. Choosing a tree, Paul D laments, “had been hard because Sweet Home had more pretty trees than any farm around” (Beloved 21). Trees like Brother become even more important to Paul D after his escape because, upon the advice of the Cherokee tribe with which he first sought sanctuary, he follows different “tree flowers” to safety...
And when Paul D occasionally loses sight of the flowering trees, he “climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him” (112-13). The little sapling, a smaller version of Brother to which Paul D connects while imprisoned in Alfred, Georgia, becomes the final, diminished tree image to hold import for Paul D. However, Morrison subtly complicates all of these seemingly nurturing trees within her text. Paul D’s wonderful memories of Brother make it easy to forget that his act of looking back for a last glimpse of his favorite tree causes him to see the hateful image of Mister that challenges his manhood and continues to haunt him for years (106). Likewise, while trees help Paul D to escape from slavery, when he escapes from prison, he and the other prisoners must fight “the live-oak branches that blocked their way” (111). Morrison even renders the small sapling ambiguous when Paul D reflects that he “stayed alive to sing songs that murdered life, and watched an aspen that confirmed it, and never for a minute did he believe he could escape” (221). Morrison’s use of the pronoun “it” leaves ambiguous whether the aspen confirms life, or, like the song, confirms the murder of it. Paul D’s lack of hope for escape implies the validity of the latter interpretation; if the tiny tree confirms any sort of life at all, it confirms only the hopelessness of a life with no chance for freedom.

Paul D’s conflicted tree images combine to express reservations about his own manhood, an issue that he struggles with throughout the novel. Questions surrounding his masculinity occupy Paul D from early on; even while he remains a slave, he questions the manhood bestowed upon him by Mr. Garner: “Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?” (Beloved 125). Trudier Harris notes the connection between Mister’s and Paul D’s ideas about manhood and determines, “In popular definitions of maleness, Mister is ultimately the ‘cock’ that Paul D can never become. It is that irony that makes the sight of Mister so painful for Paul D when he is wearing the iron bit in his mouth” (181). So when Paul D looks back for a final glimpse of Brother and instead sees Mister, part of what causes him to begin to tremble seems tied to questions about his manhood. In fact, as Schopp notes, Paul D even diminishes his own manhood with tree-like terms when he lies in bed observing Sethe’s scar and compares himself and her scar to Sixo and Brother (221). In that scene, Paul D thinks, “Now there was a man, and that was a tree. Himself lying in the bed and the ‘tree’ lying next to him didn’t compare” (Beloved 22).

Paul D also talks about different events that destroy masculinity using tree metaphors. For example, when he tells Sethe that Halle saw the boys steal her milk, Paul D says that Halle’s inability to protect his wife as he watched the spectacle “broke him like a twig” (68). Paul D extends this metaphor after Sethe criticizes Halle for his lack of action: Paul D responds, “A man ain’t a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside” (69). Similarly, when Paul D later thinks of the guards at the prison in Alfred, he employs another tree metaphor when he describes them as “Little men, some of them, big men too, each one of whom he could snap like a twig if he wanted to. Men who knew their manhood lay in their guns.” Tellingly, these guards control nature: “in that place mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon—everything belonged to the men who had the guns” (162). In Alfred, the men with the guns control nature and make it unnatural by subjugating Paul D, who, on equal footing, could indeed snap them like a twig.

Paul D’s manhood becomes further entangled with Morrison’s natural imagery when he reveals the ambigu-
ty of his love for nature. Morrison writes, “in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it” (268). While Paul D cannot love what he does not own, he can, the text suggests, become a part of it. While Paul D questions his own masculinity, Morrison simultaneously affirms it within her text when she describes him as a “hazelnut man” with “Peachstone skin” (37, 7). Also, like a tree, Paul D wants to “take root” and live with Sethe (221). Paul D’s return to Sethe at novel’s end seems to disprove Baby’s earlier observation that “A man ain’t nothing but a man” (23). Paul D wants to stay with Sethe, as he puts it, to “put his story next to hers” precisely because she acknowledges his manhood; in this last scene between them, Paul D remembers Sethe’s “tenderness about his neck jewelry” and knows that only Sethe “could have left him his manhood like that” (273).

Clearly, Morrison makes nothing about this novel straightforward, not even something as elemental as its trees. Beyond the eventual redemption that Bonnet identifies in those trees lies incredible complexity. Sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and always interesting, Morrison creates tree images as varied and contradictory as the characters that identify with them. All of which begs one simple question—why? On one level, Morrison uses the tree to show how slavery literally perverts nature. Whether in the more general jungle that white masters plant within each slave (198-99), or in the specific tree on Sethe’s back, Morrison shows how slavery systematically misrepresents itself as a natural order, but actually operates anti-thetically to naturalize, superficially, the unnatural. Her depiction also subverts the idea of growth as inherently constructive; positive growth seems balanced, or in some cases even counter-acted, by the destructive growth of objects like that jungle originating within each slave and the scar on Sethe’s back. But Morrison also depicts the positive aspects of trees, and thus complicates that equation in a way that allows the more hopeful interpretation that Bonnet articulates. For example, the image of the Sweet Home men hanging in the trees that so disturbs Sethe seems inversely related to her description of “that thing you use to hang the babies in the trees—so you could see them out of harm’s way while you worked the fields” (160).

And this duality frightens Sethe most of all. Her fear becomes evident when she first thinks of the lynched Sweet Home men hanging from the trees early in the novel: “Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. 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” (6). While Sethe could use the term “boys” to refer to the Sweet Home men here, as she does later when she again thinks of “those boys hanging in the trees” (198), she would never have described Paul A and her other fellow slaves as “children.” The children Sethe would most logically associate with the dead men would be her own. Such a reading seems validated by Sethe’s memory of her sons, young men by the novel’s end, “sometimes in beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves” (39). Sethe’s mind somehow conflates her fears for her sons with the fate that many of the Sweet Home men suffered; indeed, death by hanging during this historical period was a frighteningly real possibility for any black man. Sethe’s fear goes a long way towards explaining why “there was not a leaf on that farm [Sweet Home] that did not make her want to scream” (6). Yet white men, not the beautiful trees of Sweet Home, are responsible for the brand of violence that Sethe
fears awaits her boys.

In the end, perhaps Morrison’s dual usage of the tree metaphor simply points back to the inherent ambiguity of the natural world and implies that the earth in and of itself is not as hopeless as it often seems. Just as she describes Sweet Home as a place where “Fire and brimstone” hid in “lacy groves,” she intimates that things in this world that hurt also contain the potential to heal (6). The world that shapes us, necessarily, the world that we have created. Ultimately, the worlds of our yesterday, today, and tomorrow can only become what we make of them, and, as such, these multifaceted worlds contain even more of potential, and potential complexity, than does the one Morrison depicts through even the most seemingly inconsequential aspects of Beloved.

Notes

1. For example, in Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye, Claudia thinks that Mr. Henry, the man who later molests Frieda, smells “wonderful. Like trees and lemon vanishing cream” (15). Later in Song of Solomon, Solomon, the legendary flying African, drops his son Jake when he “brushed too close to a tree and the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. He was unconscious, but the trees saved him from dying” (324). The same trees that prevent Jake from accompanying his father on his flight to freedom also prevent his death. And in Tar Baby, the novel that immediately precedes Beloved, the main character, Jadine, almost sinks into a patch of quicksand enclosed by a “circle of trees,” but saves herself by grabbing hold of one of the trees comprising the circle (182-83). And rather than Jadine simply pulling herself to safety, the tree also seems to take an active role in her rescue as she imagines dancing with it as it “sighed and swayed” (183).

2. Bonnet describes the dead skin of the scar as first symbolizing Sethe’s “repression of unbearable memories” and the “suppression of all emotion” about her experience of enslavement (45). Bonnet also points out that the scar calls to mind a genealogical tree (47), and that its location on Sethe’s back, in opposition to her breasts, mirrors the way her conception of motherhood opposes the “principle of the tree” that deals with division and life (48). Many other critics have offered interpretations of the scar that vary along these themes. In Toni Morrison, Linden Peach reads Sethe’s scar as the text of enslavement that her master has literally written on her body (107-8). Corey reads the scar as an image of the grotesque (34), and Faris points out that the scar celebrates female relatedness because it marks the positive interaction between Sethe and Amy (178).

3. In addition to Bonnet’s aforementioned theory that the scar “mirrors both the repression of unbearable memories and, in a more general way, the suppression of all emotion” (45), Corey, for example, writes that “the 'lifeless' picture [of Sethe's scar] represents the blocked memory and emotions that separate her from a full, subjective identity” (35).

4. While I do not argue that by enacting “her extreme and exclusive self-definition as a mother, Sethe becomes what Schoolteacher defined her as: an animal without memory” when she murders her child (Jones 342), Sethe does extend exactly the sort of violence that the tree on her back stands for even as she attempts to do the opposite by shielding her daughter from the degradation that she herself experienced as a slave. As Morrison herself said of Sethe’s destructive act in an interview with Bill Moyers in 1989, “Someone gave me the line for it at one time which I have found useful. 'It was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it’” (272).

5. Jones, for example, connects Sethe’s scar both to trees at Sweet Home and to Paul D’s sapling in Alfred, Georgia: “Like the trees at Sweet Home and like Paul D’s sapling, however, Sethe finally bends and, thus, survives—even prevails” (354). And in “Chokecherry Tree(s): Operative Modes of Metaphor in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” Heike Hartner asserts that Sethe’s scar “can be simultaneously read as gallows, iron-maze, Brother, aspen, [and] roses of blood” (32).
——. “From the Sublime to the Beautiful: The Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison.” Conner 49-76.
Jones, Carolyn M. “Sula and Beloved: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison.” Iyassere and Iyassere 338-56.