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Social Rejection: Challenging the Freed Slave Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
Sethe's 'Unsuccessful' Performance in Society	7
The Stranger We All Need	16
Conclusions	20
References	23
Notes	25

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“Anyone who does anything to help a child in his life is a hero to me.”
— Fred Rogers

The relationship established between Sethe and the black community in Cincinnati, far from being an ideal one, defines her as a marginalized member. The text, on several occasions, provides an explanation based on the community's rejection of Sethe's killing of her own daughter. However, the community's rejection of Sethe also extends to some of her 'relatives' such as Baby Suggs and Paul D. Therefore, to the reader's surprise, the first hints of spite take place before Sethe's murdering. It is under these circumstances that the reader is forced to question the difficulties found by the character to become a fully accepted member in the community, which at the same time leads us to also question the complexities of the social relationships among the members of freed slave communities, too. Therefore, can we take for granted that Sethe's murder is the only reason behind the community of Cincinnati's rejection? How is the reader to approach Baby Suggs and Paul D's rejection of the heroine?

The aim of this essay is to provide an analysis of the complex social system rooted at the very heart of the ex-slave communities such as the one depicted in the novel and provide an explanation for Cincinnati's rejection of Sethe. The analysis offers an insight into the huge difficulties that freed slaves faced when trying to build their own communities and demythologizes the idea of freed slave communities as a paradise where freedom automatically stands for a perfect communion among all its members. I believe this approach to the freed slave's communities may contribute to a better understanding of the already

horrifying life that ex-slaves had to endure after their success in running away from their owners and, consequently, unfold a new perspective on the character of Sethe.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* introduces the character of Sethe, an ex-slave woman who is chased by her master after having succeeded in her attempt to run away with all her children. After struggling for several days -walking pregnant through the forest, and giving birth to a baby girl on the banks of the Ohio River with the help of a white girl- Sethe eventually reaches Cincinnati and meets her children, who are guarded by her mother-in-law. Refusing to accept the possibility of giving back her children to her previous owner after having experienced freedom for twenty-eight days, she resolves to kill them all, though she eventually succeeds in killing only her oldest daughter. Sethe's social rejection on the part of the black community in Cincinnati is hinted at in the novel from its very beginning. The narrator very clearly stresses the tension between Sethe's house and the rest of the town.

It had been a long time since anybody (good-willed whitewoman, preacher, speaker or newspaperman) sat at their table, their sympathetic voices called liar by the revulsion in their eyes. For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends. No coloredpeople. (sic14)

It is surprising to find such an unfriendly relationship among members of the freed slave community precisely because they all have come to live together after their escape from the atrocities experienced under bondage. However, as must be expected, the ambiguities embedded in the institution of slavery make it necessary to go beyond the preconceived ideas of natural slaving and bonding that have been traditionally related with the world of the freed slave.

The explanation provided in the text points out Sethe's murder of her eldest daughter as the main reason for her social alienation. In chapter XIX Ella, the white abolitionist, verbalizes the reason that made Sethe break up with the local community. When Stamp Paid tells her that she and Sethe were friends before she replies: 'Yeah, till she showed herself.

[...] I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children.' (221). However, as will be proved, this explanation turns out to be unsatisfactory and unreliable. The problem with this explanation is that it fails to account for the rest of the characters who are also victims of some sort of social rejection because of their kinship with our heroine. Paul D, for instance, is forced to sleep at the church after he decides to leave Sethe's house. The following excerpt from a conversation between Stamp Paid and Ella reveals how the community questions the nature of Sethe's escape and, by extension, her real feelings towards her own family. The conversation turns out to be a complete prejudice against our heroine, who is accused of adultery, unfaithfulness and calumny.

"Why? Why he have to ask? Can't nobody offer? What's going on? Since when a blackman come to town have to sleep in a cellar like a dog?"

"Unrile yourself, Stamp."

[...] "Look here, I don't know who Sethe is or none of her people."

"What?!"

"All I know is she married Baby Suggs' boy and I ain't sure I know that. Where is he, huh? Baby never laid eyes on her till John carried her to the door with a baby I strapped on her chest."

"I strapped that baby! And you way off the track with that wagon. Her children know who she was even if you don't."

"So what? I ain't saying she wasn't their ma'ammy, but who's to say they was Baby Suggs' grandchildren? How she get on board and her husband didn't? And tell me this, how she have that baby in the woods by herself? Said a whitewoman come out the trees and helped her. Shoot. You believe that? A whitewoman? Well, I know what kind of white that was." (220)

Ella's comments do not only point out the unacceptability of Sethe's murder but rather work as a very careful description of what Sethe represents for the community. Sethe's murder is just the starting point for her to be accused of slander, mistrust and unfaithfulness towards Halle by Ella and, by extension, the whole community. She becomes an outcast inside her own community of freed black slaves. She represents a threat to the community's social organization but, at the same time, she also fulfills a very important role in it, as will be explained later on in this essay.

The importance of Ella's words does not rely on the fact that she has refused to put up Paul D but rather on the the fact that absolutely everybody in town has failed to sympathize with him. Ella functions here as a spokeswoman for the whole community, and that is what leads us to question the moral standards of freed black slave communities. Do they really support black people unconditionally? Are there any requirements in order to be fully accepted? Does the community have the power to 'punish' its members?

The most controversial rejection of all is the one that takes place in Baby Suggs' celebration of Sethe's arrival in Cincinnati. What apparently is expected to be a happy celebration for the whole black community turns out to be the beginning of a highly complex relationship between 124 Bluestone Road and the rest of the community.

It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride.

The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air. Baby Suggs woke to it and wondered what it was as she boiled hominy for her grandchildren. Later, as she stood in the garden, chopping at the tight soil over the roots of the pepper plants, she smelled it again. (162)

The relevance of the above passage relies on the fact that the events it refers to take place the very same week Sethe arrives at Baby Sugg's place, which means that the murder has not been committed yet. According to this, the account for Sethe's social rejection provided in the text proves to be, if not false, at least incomplete. So, in what terms are we to approach the relationship between our heroine and the black community in Cincinnati?

In order to properly account for the social inconsistencies already mentioned I propose two different ways to approach the community's rejection of Sethe that I believe complement each other. On the one hand, it is necessary to look at the character of Sethe individually and check how she manages, if she does so, to fulfill her role as a mother, as a neighbor and as a lover. On the other hand, it is also important to analyze the complexities of individual and communal relationships in the black communities of freed slaves during the reconstruction

period. It is in this second part of the essay where Julia Kristeva's analysis on the dynamics between the figure of the 'stranger' and their community will be particularly interesting. I believe these two approaches will help us to better understand the rejection inflicted on our heroine.

Sethe's 'Unsuccessful' Performance in Society

As Denver acknowledges very early in the novel, Sethe's home shows clear signs of instability and lack of control. In fact, it is a ghost what, at a given point, seems to rule the house. This fact stresses the idea that Bluestone Road 124 is different from the rest of the houses in Cincinnati and places Sethe out of the role of the expected housewife she is meant to be. It is very important to bear in mind that ex-slave communities had a very clear social organization; they had a strong sense of community and also provided, within their obvious limitations, public services such as churches, private societies, schools, to name but a few (Litwack, 1979), the same way the whites did. All members were entitled to aspire to a certain standard lifestyle regardless of their economical status. (Gutman, 1976). As Williamson notes in 'After Slavery: the Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction: 1861-1877' Black communities unconsciously reproduced many of the most characteristic sociological features of the white community which is one of the most controversial contradictions in the emergence of freed slave communities. As we shall see, the lack of alternative referents is what led the white model to become the basis of the new freed slave community.

Negroes built a community exclusive their own, quite apart, quite distinct from that of the whites, but withal as nearly perfect in its reflection a mirrored image. (Williamson, 1990:300)

The role attached to women in these communities shows how rigorous this mirroring of the white community was. Both men and women's roles in freed slave communities were very much restricted to those existing in the white communities, in fact they followed very similar patterns. Men were expected to work and provide an income for the family whereas women had to take care of the household and the children (Williamson: 308). The attempt to imitate the white society indirectly introduced the patriarchal model inside their own 'sub-culture', that is to say, the figure of the male as the head of the family and the one responsible

for keeping it under control. As Jones indicates in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*,

Within the limited public arena open to blacks, the husband represented the entire family, a cultural preference reinforced by demographic and economic factors. In 1870, 80 percent of black households in the Cotton Belt included a male head and his wife (a proportion identical to that in the neighboring white population). [...] Thus these men exercised authority by virtue of their age as well as their sex. (Jones, 1995: 62)

The problem with Sethe's character is that she, from the very beginning, does not seem to fit into the established 'conventions'. The character's great determination leads her to go beyond the imposed social boundaries limiting her acting capacity. On the one hand, she trespasses the black female sphere by allowing herself to have feelings that only white women were allowed and, on the other hand, she incurs into the male sphere by asserting strong gender-conditioned¹ moral principles - "No more running from nothing. I will never run from another thing on earth" (18) - that shock many of the characters involved in the action and stresses the rift between her and the community. Paul D, for instance, very quickly notices it and warns Sethe that "[her] love is too thick" (193) implying that she, just like all former slaves, should not develop any type of material or emotional bond with other people, even with her own offspring. Sethe's most characteristic feature is her limitless love towards her family, her 'thick love'. Contrary to Paul D's advice, Sethe consciously builds an unbreakable emotional bond with her children based on her right to be a mother; 'I took and put *my* babies where they'd be safe' (193) [italics are mine]. It is important to stress that slaves, and very particularly women slaves, were exposed to the loss of their loved ones because they all were subjected to the owner's wishes. The role of women slaves in plantations was particularly strategic because they were the ones in charge of not only their own offspring but also the owner's.

The fact that all slaves could be sold, exchanged or even killed without notice regardless of their age, sex and physical condition influenced in a very stigmatic manner the way women slaves experienced motherhood. Such an unstable and anomalous situation literally deprived them from experiencing motherly love and forced them to develop weaker - not 'too thick'- emotional ties with their offspring. In other words, women slaves could not experience love beyond the limits imposed by their master. Their identity was shaped by the way the whites conceived them; their role as 'mummy' was very much limited by what was expected from them and their function in the white master's house. As bell hooks states in *Ain't I A Woman*, these slaves were particularly dehumanized in the sense that they usually conformed to a stereotype. Mummies had to be 'asexual' and look sexually unattractive in order to avoid any possible sexual arousal on the part of the master.

They saw her as the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but also who loved them. (hooks, 1992: 84-85)

It is a consequence of the previous premise that women slaves had no other choice than develop artificial forms of love towards all their acquaintances and particularly to all the babies they had to take care of in the plantation, including their own offspring. All babies were automatically acknowledged as part of the owner's property, which left no room at all for them to develop natural motherly love. Sethe's determination to reject these behavioral constraints is, in fact, one of the most relevant differences between her and the rest of the characters in the novel. The following passage shows how Paul D and Sethe differ in the importance that emotions play in their relationships.

"Your love is too thick," he said, thinking, That bitch is looking at me; she is right over my head looking down through the floor at me.

"Too thick?" she said, thinking of the Clearing where Baby Suggs' commands knocked the pods off horse chestnuts. (193-194)

Paul D's comments prove to what extent the dehumanizing effect of slavery is incorporated into the identity of the freed slave and his own community. It is precisely Sethe's struggle to get rid of this psychological burden that causes a rift between her and the rest of the community. There is another instance in the novel in which the strength and outstanding determination of the character of Sethe is more overtly displayed. The following passage shows the character's reaction after one of the most destructive incursions of the ghost in the house. Sethe manages to keep calm and put everything back in order, she even performs a small surgery on the dog and puts back in place one of its eyes. This passage also shows the *nursing* and *nurturing* dichotomy inherent in the figure of the slave woman. The character's ability to remain under control after the several incursions that the ghost performs in the house and her ability to run the household without the need of a male partner are somehow attitudes that are to be circumscribed more into the male sphere rather than the female sphere. In relation to this idea, bell hooks claims that slavewomen's 'ability to cope effectively in sexist-defined "male" role threatened patriarchal myths about the nature of woman's inherent physiological difference and inferiority' (hooks: 71).

[...] when the baby's spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. She had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his leg bones. He recovered, mute and off-balance, more because of his untrustworthy eye than his bent legs, and winter, summer, drizzle or dry, nothing could persuade him to enter the house again. Now here was this woman with the presence of mind to repair a dog gone savage with pain rocking her crossed ankles and looking away from her own daughter's body. As though the size of it was more than vision could bear. And neither she nor he had on shoes. (14)

Sethe's behavior shows that she truly believes in herself; she feels confident and acts with no hesitation according to her own principles. She is determined to keep her house under control and make sure that her family, including poor Here Boy, is safe and sound. No matter how hard the ghost hits the house, she is still able to put everything back in order. These events

prove to what extent Sethe trespasses the household sphere in which women were expected to conform. It could even be added that she, in fact, takes over some of the duties socially attached to the male figure, it is this inversion of roles what really challenges the black community in Cincinnati.²

The way the household budget is managed also raises some controversies. The communities of freed slaves were very much concerned with their limited purchase power and were used to professing a life clearly marked by austerity. As can be expected, women were usually the ones who took care of the household economy.

Given the instability of the household's income from day to day and from year to year, and the disproportionately large share of blacks as opposed to white immigrant household income consumed by housing costs, black mothers had to institute a hand-to-mouth budgeting system. (Jones, 1995: 187)

Baby Suggs's celebration of Sethe's arrival challenges precisely this particular vision of the household economy, just the same way Sethe does when she spends all her savings and takes Denver and Beloved ice-skating and later on when she buys colorful fabrics to make new dresses for them all.

It is when Baby Suggs dies that the house starts to disintegrate. Howard and Buglar's flight is just one of the consequences but it seems to be that the origin of this disintegration has to do with Sethe's strong personality. Her 'too thick' love for her 'family' forces her to remain single, which clearly outstood in a woman of her age. She was in her twenties when she reached Cincinnati but still decided to avoid marriage and, therefore, reject "a pattern that had deep roots in black life" (Gutman, 1976: 445). Sethe develops a lifestyle that challenges all the principles of the discourse of 'true womanhood, wifehood and motherhood' of the time (Carby, 1987: 26).

Henceforth, she does not repress her sexuality but rather shows great freedom in her display of sexual desire towards Paul D³. Sexual self-imposed repression is probably one of

the elements that more clearly accounts for the feminine values that black freed slaves inherited from the white feminine model (Carby: 27). The reproduction of *alien* conventions clashes with the nature of the black female reality. The white feminine pattern is only to be conceived within the reality of the white –Southern- woman, traditionally referred to as the ‘Southern Belle’. This white feminine pattern, though, was developed for a woman prototype that was essentially freed from work and very much devoted to the figure of the husband. They usually did not even breastfeed their own children. By contrast, the reality of both freed and non-freed black slave women was determined by labour. Regardless of their subjection to an owner, black women had to work inside and outside the home. It is, therefore, not surprising that the adoption of such unfamiliar values on the part of black women triggered so many inconsistencies in their own communities. This contradiction has already been discussed by authors such as bell hooks, who affirms that ‘enslaved black females [...] were not proud of their ability to labor alongside men in the fields [*and*] wanted more than anything for their lot to be the same as that of white women’. [*Italics are mine*] (hooks, 1992: 48)

These are the facts that make the community no longer recognize Sethe as a full member and, consequently, treat her like a stranger. Automatically, an alienation process is implemented. Sethe’s behavior causes a rift between herself and the rest of her fellow women who, paradoxically, are the only ones who can grant her full membership. Jacqueline Jones points out the importance of the influence that both personal and communal obligations had on the relationship between the members of the community as individuals and the rest of the community as a group. The author’s perspective on the social structure of freed slave communities prevents us from approaching this issue from a simplistic point of view. As the novel shows, freed slave communities had highly complex forms of social organization that constrained very significantly the role of its members and punished those who did not abide by its rules.

Beginning in the slave era, the family obligations of wives and mothers overlapped in the area of community welfare as their desire to nurture their own kin expanded out of the private realm and into public activities that advanced the interests of Black people as a group. [...] This type of work [...] earned Black women the respect of their own people. (Jones, 1995: 3)

Sethe's own personal identity is what inevitably is going to prevent her from taking part in the community life. During the period in which Baby Suggs is alive this social rejection is very much restrained because of the role this character plays in the community. Contrary to Sethe, Baby Suggs is a very active member in the community and she has, using Jones' words, 'earned the respect of their own people' (1995: 3). She eventually becomes a sort of spiritual guide for the whole community and delivers very powerful speeches that aim to make the members of the community acknowledge their humanity. The following excerpt shows to what extent Baby Suggs managed to influence the life of the community.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (103)

However, as the novel shows, right after Baby Sugg's death Bluestone Road 124 becomes literally a haunted place. Both Denver's complaints at the very beginning of the novel and the reaction of the neighbors going past the house depicted in the film adaptation⁴ give us an idea of the status awarded to Sethe. She is an outcast, a threat to the fragile structure of the community that, just as has already been mentioned, aims to reproduce those of their white country fellows.

Once we have reached this point we should query to what extent this "new" black society may be interpreted as a faithful mirror of the white one. What are their main similarities? Is there any pattern behind their social structure? Is there any way out of the 'white pattern'? These are the kind of questions that Morrison's writing tries to address. On the one hand, she shows how the institution of slavery leaves individuals unable to keep a

psychologically stable life -even after being freed- and, on the other hand, she stresses the need to recover African cultural roots in order to come to terms with a past of bondage that influenced so negatively the stability of black communities in the US after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1865. In other words, the social inconsistencies found in freed slave communities are a direct consequence of what Aimé Césaire defined as a common history of subjugation. In *Discours sur le colonialisme* the author emphasizes the still overwhelming ruling position that the West holds over the rest of the world: ‘C’est l’Occident qui fait l’ethnographie des autres, non les autres qui font l’ethnographie de l’Occident’ (Césaire, 1955: 51).

[M]orrison emphasizes once more the manifold ways in which the past determines the present and future of the black community, and how important it is to retell African American history from their own vantage point. (Gallego, 2007: 93)

Toni Morrison conceives the source of the conflict inside the black community as an external influence located precisely outside the actual community. She does not aim to identify the source of the conflict only but rather puts forth an alternative mechanism for the building of stable black community ties by recovering African American history. The real conflict behind the instability of black communities has to do with the bases upon which their ‘borrowed’ patriarchal model has been built. This patriarchal model is a mirroring of the white one in the sense that it has been historically developed from essentially white values. It aims to provide the white community with social stability and a clear social structure according to their particular historical background. It is in this very last point that the problems within the black community begin to arise. The black community comes from a different historical background that has nothing to do with the white one. Black slaves were deprived of their own culture and forced to adapt themselves to a radically different environment not only in terms of geography but also of language, culture, religion, social structure, to name but a few. Their African

identity was literally erased to the extent that slaves were renamed with western names and forced to communicate in English, their 'new' language. Slaves were named after their owners and the nature of their names could vary significantly. They were usually named according to the job they did or to their owner's surname though, sometimes, they were also registered with religious names taken from the Bible. The importance of this naming policy is that it establishes a very ambiguous relationship of property/fatherhood between the owner and the slave, who is deprived of any sign of identity, 'What you call yourself? / Nothing, [Baby Suggs] said, I don't call myself nothing' (167). The fact that slaves carried the name of their owners for the rest of their lives created a never-ending attachment to their past as slaves. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that most of the characters in *Beloved* are constantly identified as former members of Mr. Garner's plantation, Sweet Home. The following passage from the novel shows to what extent the characters are bound to their past in the plantation. Here Sethe introduces Paul D to Denver for the first time.

"Here she is my Denver. This is Paul D, honey, from Sweet Home."
"Good morning, Mr. D."
"Garner, baby. Paul D Garner." (13)

What Toni Morrison's writing points at is the incompatibility of this essentially white patriarchal pattern with the disruption that slavery cast upon the values of freed slave communities. In other words, the coupling of these two elements cannot succeed because they develop from unrelated backgrounds and realities, namely that of the oppressor and the oppressed. This is precisely the reason why it is so important to place African American history at the basis of any attempt to really understand the nature of black culture and also to develop societal models that bend to their own historical background.

The Stranger We All Need

There is no need to discuss the fact that human societies are built on a series of social conventions and traditions that inevitably not only define the way they function but also perpetuate their own idiosyncrasies. It is according to this idea that it must be assumed that Sethe's community, just like any other, must have been built on a particular social pattern that may be at the back of Sethe's social alienation. Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva argues that all communities with no exception are prone to identify some of the roles performed by part of its members as a deviation from the norm: 'the sense of strangeness is a mainspring for identification with the other, by working out its depersonalizing impact by means of astonishment' (Kristeva, 1991: 189) ⁵. According to her, the figure of the stranger allows human communities to reassert their identity in direct opposition to the stranger's. This way, the group strengthens the members' communal ties and guarantees both its supremacy and its perpetuation in time. It is, therefore, not difficult to establish a relationship between Kristeva's idea and the black community depicted in the novel by Morrison. Sethe's community is meant to be interpreted in this context, too; it needs someone to fulfill the position of the stranger. Sethe meets all the necessary requirements to become this scapegoat through which the community gets rid of its own problems – Julia Kristeva points out this idea as a sort of social 'pollution' - (Kristeva: 48).

In order to come to terms with its own history, Sethe's community creates a lifestyle that attempts to organize and keep the social stability under control by inevitably and unconsciously taking the white community as a reference, which is patriarchal by nature. It is precisely this patriarchal nature, along with the mothering role traditionally attached to black women in general (Greene, 1990: 207), which creates the enormous gap between Sethe and her fellow citizens. This social mirroring influences not only the lives of the individuals but

also their institutions, personal tastes, gastronomy, and, most definitely, gender roles in relation to each other and also in relation to their community. The social constraints framing the individual's space limit very strictly their social performance and force them to develop any kind of individual consciousness or identity only within the accepted parameters. The fact that the slave's reality was both physically and psychologically limited to the reality of the plantation relegated slaves to a position of utter unawareness of any kind of alternative social values and organizations; in other words, the white pattern constituted the only reality they knew. Social improvement, therefore, can only be achieved by means of social equality; this is actually the underlying problem behind the inconsistencies of the white society and, consequently, the freed slaves' unsuccessful copy. The mirroring of the white community traces back to the very origins of American slavery.

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* bell hooks affirms that 'the displaced Africans assimilated American values, they wanted to have the ecclesiastical and civil ceremonies their masters and mistresses had' (hooks, 1992: 43) although they were never legally acknowledged. However, the mere copying of these rites of passage, just to mention an example, did not occur in isolation and resulted in the adoption of a much wider set of values and traditions developed from the *patriarchal* white society. This influenced the black individual at all levels and determined the formation of their own sub-culture.

Tichenor dealt with the social role of black women in her article 'Thinking About Gender and Power in Marriage' and put forth the notion of 'domesticity' (Tichenor, 2008). According to her, women were exclusively limited to the household/domestic affairs, among which the raising of the offspring was, by large, the most important one. This pattern, though indirectly, automatically inscribes the role of men outside the women's sphere. It is, therefore, not very surprising to draw a parallelism between the above mentioned social arrangement and the patriarchal institution. In the novel, *Sethe* blurs these delineations and trespasses the

established racial boundaries by allowing herself to experience love freely, 'Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all' (194). Adrienne Rich points out that the basis of these patriarchal premises is actually rooted in the notion of 'motherhood'. She claims that this term makes reference to both the physical capacity of women to bear children and, more important, the identity that this feature grants them in the social context and the constraints involved in it.

I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed to the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential –and all women– shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. (Rich, 1986: 13)

The most relevant characteristic of this social system is that it provides a clear identity -in terms of gender- to all individuals; 'men and women get more "credit" [...] for engaging in activities that are consistent with conventional gender identities' (Tichenor, 2008: 405).

In the above mentioned article by Rich it is highlighted the potential of the institution of motherhood as a tool to keep women 'under control'. However, the potential of such 'keystone' (Rich, 1986) cannot be taken as a mere instrument used by men to assert their supremacy only. Women have also managed to build their own identity inside the patriarchal system by celebrating their irreplaceable role in the institution of motherhood granted to them by nature. The risk, however, lies on the fact that such institution is dependant on the already mentioned patriarchal system and, therefore, dependant on all its own social constraints. As can be inferred, the patriarchal system perpetuates itself by means of a strict hierarchical structure, which prevents new communities from developing alternative types of structures based on different cultural backgrounds. Going back to our concern about Sethe's social role in the novel, we may now more clearly see to what extent she really is perceived as a real threat to the community's stability. Ella, whose character can be seen as the embodiment of the communal voice of Cincinnati, disapproves of Sethe's behavior and establishes a very

clear barrier between our heroine and the rest of the community, 'I ain't got no friends take a handsaw to their own children' (221). She is different from her country fellows in many respects and constantly challenges the social constraints she is expected to abide by.

Mr. Sawyer included midday dinner in the terms of the job--along with \$3 .40 a week-- and she made him understand from the beginning she would take her dinner home. But matches, sometimes a bit of kerosene, a little salt, butter too--these things she took also, once in a while, and felt ashamed because she could afford to buy them; she just didn't want the embarrassment of waiting out back of Phelps store with the others till every white in Ohio was served before the keeper turned to the cluster of Negro faces looking through a hole in his back door. (223-224)

Her performance does not limit itself to the household space and, to some extent, seems to take over the male's role. Sethe takes care of her house in all possible ways, she cooks and cleans but also fixes furniture and takes care of the orchard. She is a protective figure ready to defend *her* home to the utmost; if necessary she may very well do it by means of violence. The moment when she mistakes Mr. Bodwin with schoolteacher is very revealing; Sethe is determined to kill him in order to protect her family, 'She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand' (309).

The consequences for such a powerful and striking character in a social environment such as the one portrayed in the novel can only lead to a lack of sympathy on the part of the community. It may very well be argued that the community itself is simply not ready to accept such 'deviation from the norm' from a fellow member, which in Kristeva's terms makes the community automatically turn on its internal mechanism to identify and point at the outsider, that is to say, the other, the stranger.

Conclusions

The adoption of foreign forms of social interaction on the part of the black society is inevitably at the center of any debate addressing the problems of their own community. No matter whether the issue is accounted for from a sociological, historical or literary perspective, the presence of historically conditioned values in black culture is always at stake. The consequences of this adoption are, as has been shown, vast in number and scope. This is precisely what makes the finding of a unilateral explanation for Sethe's social rejection not possible. It would not be cautious to account for this issue from the unique perspective of the black community or the character of Sethe separately. It seems much more plausible to think that the answer to our hypothesis is to be found behind Sethe's personality, the patriarchal system inherited by freed slave communities and the importance of the figure of the stranger inside human societies.

Toni Morrison herself referred to these ideas when she was interviewed (Angelo, 1989: 46-48) shortly after the publication of the novel. She showed herself reluctant to believe that there is a way out of the 'social rejection' that black people still suffer nowadays. Her main concern has to do with what she calls 'institutionalization of racism'. She truly believes that there is a 'national amnesia' affecting both blacks and whites that refrains people from remembering and coming to terms with the horrors of slavery. 'Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form', she states. Morrison's words seem to allude to a worldwide insurmountable social hierarchy that backs up white supremacy and keeps the blacks always in a subordinate position. This idea is very much related with the social problem we find in the black community depicted in the novel. The inheritance of the white idiosyncrasy condemns the community to fall into similar patterns of rejection. Very much in relation to Kristeva's ideas about the need of an 'outsider' in order to keep the rest of

a social community in harmony, Morrison states that '[the exclusion of black people] wasn't negative to them [the whites], it was unifying'. Societies are eager to constantly assert their unity and Sethe –the other, the stranger or whatever euphemism we may use to refer to it- is just the perfect element for them to do so.

The acknowledgement of the African origins of black culture appears as the only way out of this unsuccessfully simulated white patriarchal model (wa'Thiongo: 2004). The text suggests that any attempt to adapt one's culture to another system of values is almost inevitably doomed to fail. Making people aware of this phenomenon is pointed out as a crucial stage prior to any attempt to reach real –social- freedom. There is a significant change in the way blacks assert their identity whereby the idea of being of slave origin is rejected in the first place. There is an emphasis on the idea of having been forced to become slaves which radically opposes the long established misconception that blacks were endowed with physical and psychological features that turned them into the perfect candidates for becoming slaves. This new perspective on the discourse of slavery is what grounds the pride that African-Americans find in their African origin, which finds its origins in the so-called Harlem Renaissance, 'What is commonly called the Harlem Renaissance today was known as the Negro Renaissance in its own time. "Negro": a word of pride, of strong vowels and a capital N' (Hutchinson, 2007: 1). This cultural movement is the first instantiation of the recovery of the African past on the part of African-Americans. Throughout the 19th century, blacks in America substantially denied their African past and insisted on their inscription as Americans. Countee Cullen's poem *Heritage* examines the role of Africa in the lives of African-American citizens and shows the impossibility for blacks to find happiness in the white community. The coarseness with which the author approaches the condition of blacks in America matches very much with Morrison's current perception of what being black in the US means. The following excerpt shows the division and alienation experienced by the poetic voice.

[...] Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black [...]

As Toni Morrison stated in the interview, ‘It is a question of education’. The remembering of the past proves to be a necessary step for the understanding of what being black in the United States means and the way black communities forge their own identity. This is in fact one of the greatest achievements in the novel and what, I believe, turns it into a story to necessarily be passed on.

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¹ It is important to notice that Sethe follows a very manly pattern for asserting her freedom by herself instead of relying on her position as a married woman to Halle and, later on, as Paul D's partner.

² The reproduction of the –white- patriarchal model by African Americans has been already underlined by several scholars as one of the greatest conflicts at the center of the black community. It is, furthermore, a constant trait in Toni Morrison's literary career. In her article 'Love and the Survival of the Black Community' Mar Gallego explores the consequences of the adoption of the white patriarchal model within the household sphere and how it influences gender relationships. Cosey, the male protagonist in Toni Morrison's *Love*, fails to build a stable family because he doesn't abide by the same principles and institutions such as marriage or religion. The adaptation of the white patriarchal model into the black society is not possible because they do not share the same principles (Gallego, 94).

³ It is in the film adaptation that Sethe's sexual desire for Paul D is more clearly portrayed. In some scenes Sethe appears as the initiator of sexual activity. Far from being a passive element in the action she does not refrain from expressing her desire.

⁴ In the film adaptation Sethe's house is located next to a very busy road, on the outskirts of Cincinnati. All the people going past her house deliberately avoid eye contact with her by quickening their pace. She is remembered as a murderess. There is another scene in the film in which Sethe goes to buy some fabrics and as soon as she enters the shop all the women in the queue start gossiping among each other about her.

⁵ In the film adaptation this idea of astonishment is very well depicted when Sethe goes to John Shillito's to buy 'yellow ribbon, shiny buttons and bits of black lace' (282). In this scene all the customers in the shop look at Sethe with surprise because they are aware of her current financial and family situation but still she spends money on unnecessary colorful clothes.