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VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS, AND IMPLICATED SUBJECTS: THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA
IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *INDIAN KILLER* AND TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS, AND IMPLICATED SUBJECTS: THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA
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BY SEVANA STEPANIAN

This thesis begins by introducing literary trauma theory and the debates about the ethics of representing the perpetrator perspective. I address these debates by turning to two novels that complicate the dichotomy of “victim” and “perpetrator” that can be found in most works of trauma literature. Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* (1996) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987)—novels that take up the experience of Native peoples and the effects of slavery, respectively—shed light on the various kinds of trauma that led some of the victims depicted in the novels to become perpetrators themselves. In this essay, I analyze how the novels tackle the question of responsibility for these complicated figures: does their victimhood prevent their culpability as perpetrators of violence? I ultimately argue that the two novels raise and then move away from the question of responsibility of the victims-turned-perpetrators. Instead, they turn the focus towards people who are implicated in the perpetration of trauma in more subtle, non-violent ways. By drawing attention to the “ordinary” participants of the perpetration of trauma who are ignorant of their own implication, the novels demonstrate the colonial/neocolonial attacks that characterize the past, persist into the present, and threaten the future.

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Introduction

In the 1990s, literary scholars began to approach literature using the framework of trauma theory. This lens illuminates the effects of extreme violence in literature, and allows critics to explore the ways in which these effects unfold for victims in the years after the traumatic events themselves. In this thesis, I will be discussing two novels that diverge from conventional responses to trauma found in works of trauma literature by portraying victims who become perpetrators of trauma or violence themselves.

Early trauma theory posits an event-based theory of trauma, in which trauma stems from the traumatic “event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 4). Cathy Caruth initiated the contemporary field of trauma studies in literature, and argues for this notion of trauma stemming from the “structure of the experience” of an event that comes back to haunt the victim. Thus, her theories are based on punctual trauma, which is trauma that stems from a singular event.

Theorists like Laura Brown and Maria Root have challenged this limited definition of trauma, and have developed the concept of “insidious trauma” (Brown 107). This theory is a feminist model that stems from the need to describe the trauma of women who suffer from “abusive situations that, while part of their everyday life, were nevertheless traumatic” (Gibbs 16).

However, as Alan Gibbs suggests, Brown’s theory “overlooks the colonial experience as a key marker of insidious trauma” (Gibbs 16-17). To bridge this gap between the insidious model of trauma and (post)colonialism, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens explain in a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* that “the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for” (3-4). The

application of the insidious model of trauma to (post)colonialism is crucial, as it describes trauma that transcends, but also includes, singular events. For example, the trauma of slavery is both insidious and punctual: there are everyday encounters with oppression, abuse, and dehumanization, as well as singular events that are especially traumatic and return to haunt the victim. Attention to the haunting return of trauma has also led to the controversial theory that an entire culture or race could be affected by the trauma of past generations, even years after the events themselves. This concept of transgenerational transmission has been described using the theories of collective and cultural memory and trauma.¹

Nancy van Styvendale argues that traditional trauma theory's claim that the traumatic event lies in the past prevents the recognition of what she calls "trans/historical trauma," trauma that continues into the present or for a long period of time (207). The idea of the "trans/historicity" of trauma is that trauma does not come only from one single event, but can instead be intergenerational and insidious. However, it can also include more definable events of trauma as well. Van Styvendale describes trans/historical trauma as "cumulative, collective, intergenerational" trauma that is not fixed in one single event "even as it demands our attention to historically specific atrocities" (203). Her idea of trans/historical trauma differs from theories of collective or cultural trauma; while those theories focus on how people in the present are *affected* by the past trauma of their ancestors, trans/historical trauma pertains to those who still suffer from traumatic incidents that she describes as "ongoing domestic colonization" or "neocolonial oppression" (208).

¹ See Marianne Hirsch ("The Generation of Postmemory") or Judith Greenberg ("Trauma and Transmission").

Against the backdrop of these theories of trauma, I will consider two contemporary American novels that depict the experiences of trauma in provocative ways. The first novel I will discuss, Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* (1996), mainly encapsulates the idea of trans/historical trauma. In Alexie's novel, the characters experience trauma as a collective whole from their culture's past, and continue to be subjected to traumatic racism in the present. The novel is about a Native American man named John Smith who was taken away from his mother as a child and placed into a white family. Never feeling authentically Indian,² nor fitting in with the white community that continues to be racist against people of color, he experiences feelings of rage and desires to kill white people. An anonymous killer, whom the characters in the story call the "Indian Killer," emerges and murders several random white victims, but the novel never reveals if the Indian Killer was actually John or someone else. The second novel I will discuss is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). This novel is about a woman named Sethe who escapes slavery with her children in 1856. Twenty-eight days after arriving at her new home where she is finally supposed to be free, the slave owner who abused and dehumanized her returns to reclaim her and her children. Without a second thought, she murders one child and attempts to murder the others and herself. Whether this act was one of protection, madness, or resistance is highly debated, which makes the book a controversial one in which the protagonist is also a perpetrator of murder. The settings, genres, cultural histories, and circumstances of the two novels are evidently

² "Indian" is the term that Sherman Alexie uses throughout the novel, so I will use it in this thesis to discuss the novel along with "Native" and "Native American." Distinctions are sometimes made between the terms, but for the purpose of this thesis I will use the terms that the novel and literary criticism use when engaging in discussions about this subject.

very different, but what they have in common is a protagonist who is a victim of colonial or neocolonial oppression and racism, who suffers trauma, and who becomes a perpetrator of murder or violence. In addition, both novels demonstrate, in a way, the effects of trans/historical trauma. This trans/historical trauma is especially evident in *Indian Killer*, as there is a wider gap between the originary collective trauma of Native people and their present-day traumatic experiences in the setting of the novel (which takes place in the late 1960s). Yet, it is also present in *Beloved* because the narrative covers both the period of slavery and the aftermath of post-Civil War emancipation.

This aspect of the trans/historical trauma in the novels—along with the insidious, collective, and intergenerational trauma that is also present—provides a more complete background of what the victims have suffered and suggests what may have led them to become perpetrators of violence. Representation of the perpetrator in literary narratives is typically a controversial topic—especially but not uniquely in Holocaust literature that is concerned with Nazi perpetrators—for several reasons. Some critics argue that it is unethical to represent the perpetrator perspective in literature. One argument is that perpetrators should not have a voice, or any kind of representation or recognition, because they have stripped the victims of their own voices (McGlothlin, “Theorizing the Perpetrator” 213-214). They claim that it “violates [their] solidarity with the victims” if they allow the perpetrators to provide their perspective (McGlothlin, “Theorizing the Perpetrator” 213).³ Another reason for reluctance is the fact that the representation of the perpetrators might portray them as victims or cause the reader to feel empathy for them. On the opposite side of the debate, scholars emphasize the importance of

³ This is not McGlothlin’s own opinion; she delineates the arguments of other critics in her essay.

incorporating the perpetrator perspective, even while asserting that some distance must be maintained between the reader and the subject.⁴ McGlothlin argues in favor of incorporation and asserts that by failing to examine the perpetrator perspective, “we construct them as abstract, mythical figures whose actions cannot be accounted for (...particularly if their thoughts and actions remain, in their extremity, essentially incomprehensible to us)” (214). I argue that this particular perspective is especially relevant to the cases of perpetrators who are victims of institutional oppression and trauma—like the perpetrators in *Indian Killer* and *Beloved*—because by constructing them as “abstract, mythical figures,” we overlook the trauma that has led them to the point of perpetrating violence.

While most scholarly criticism about perpetrator representation regards those who are indisputably perpetrators of murder or violence, concepts like “the grey zone”⁵ and “implicated subjects”⁶ refer to those figures who blur the usual perpetrator-victim dichotomy. Primo Levi’s concept of “the grey zone” refers to the Jews in the concentration camps who were coerced into running the crematoria, thereby becoming “perpetrators” themselves. However, he argues that these Jews cannot be judged because of the difficult position they were placed in by the Nazis. In addition, Michael Rothberg’s analysis of “implicated subjects” refers to those who were not directly involved in the crimes, but may have helped enable them or, in any case, did not attempt

⁴ For more on representation of the perpetrator in literary texts. see Erin McGlothlin

(“Theorizing the Perpetrator” and “Empathetic Identification”), Sue Vice, Richard Crownshaw, Robert Eaglestone, Nils Bubandt, and Rane Willerslev.

⁵ See Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*.

⁶ See Michael Rothberg’s “Trauma Theory.”

to stop them. This category might include non-Nazi Germans who looked the other way during the Holocaust or other countries who failed to aid the victims. In the novels we do find aspects of these theories, as I will emphasize again below. However, *Indian Killer* and *Beloved* also blur the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators in a significantly different way. The killers in the two novels differ from the people involved within “the grey zone” and from “implicated subjects” because the killers were not complicit, meaning that the murders were not beneficial to the oppressors. Instead, the murders were extreme acts of resistance or retaliation against their oppressors. A question that emerges from these debates about perpetrator representation is: Do literary texts that represent the perpetrator perspective attempt to excuse the perpetrator by eliciting empathy for them, and therefore is it problematic to represent their perspective at all? In this thesis, I analyze how the two texts approach the representation of the perpetrator through their narrative strategies: do they attempt to blame or excuse their actions because they are victims of trauma?

Ultimately, I will argue that the important focus of the texts is not on determining whether or not one should blame or excuse these victims-turned-perpetrators. The real aim is to push readers to consider the trans/historical effects of the trauma and oppressive systems that led the victims to feel that they had to commit murder in the first place. The novels draw attention to the racist systems that, in *Beloved*, enslave and dehumanize them, or in *Indian Killer*, continue to rip them from their roots and culture. By doing so, the novels also reveal the different kinds of participants within these racist systems who are not technically perpetrators committing violence in the conventional sense, but rather inflict trauma or oppression in a more indirect way without recognizing their own implication due to their “ordinariness.” Through comparative analysis of

these novels, we broaden our horizons by observing two different cultural histories of trans/historical and colonial/neocolonial offenses that are not merely in the past but continue into the present and threaten the future. In addition, by drawing attention to the “ordinary” people implicated in the transmission of non-violent trauma, the novels challenge readers to consider if they have been implicated in similar ways without even realizing it.

***Indian Killer*: Neocolonial Assaults Engendering Rage**

Indian Killer, which takes place in America in the late 1960s, tells the story of an Indian man named John Smith who was taken from his mother at birth and placed into a white family. As his life goes on, he suffers from feelings of inauthenticity that lead to psychological deterioration, rage, and a desire to commit violence. Meanwhile, in a parallel narrative, an anonymous serial murderer, the “Indian Killer,” emerges and begins to kill white people. The context of *Indian Killer* is the “Sixties Scoop” that took place in Canada between the 1950s and 1980s and briefly in America. The Sixties Scoop was the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities, and their subsequent placement into white families.⁷ As a result, many Native children suffered from different kinds of trauma and issues with identity, due to the government’s aim to assimilate them.

Although it is no secret that Indians face ongoing racism and prejudice that can traumatize them, the novel presents these experiences and their effects in an unconventional way. The novel seems to fall under the genre of murder mystery, yet subverts the conventions of this genre by failing to reveal the identity of the Indian Killer, who is repeatedly referred to with the pronoun “it.” In addition, a third-person omniscient narrator seamlessly switches between the focalizations of several different characters. Certain focalizers, however, are unreliable and presented as such. What makes the novel an unconventional one in the realm of trauma literature is that it grapples with the idea of victims of trauma seeking revenge and perpetrating (or

⁷ The term “Sixties Scoop” was first coined by Patrick Johnston in his work *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. For more on the Sixties Scoop and its effects, see Sinclair and Timpson.

wanting to perpetrate) acts of murder or violence. In this section, I will focus on the following questions: What is the function of the unconventional narrative strategies that are used to address issues of ongoing racism and trauma towards Native peoples? What, according to the text, are the implications of ongoing racism for how we evaluate victims who have become perpetrators of violence? The novel sets up necessary reflection on these issues. I will argue that by leaving the question of culpability open-ended, the text pushes readers to consider who the real, less obvious “perpetrators” are and how ordinary people can be part of the problem without even realizing it.

The narrator of the novel is a third-person omniscient narrator who focalizes through various, sometimes unreliable, characters. This makes it difficult to navigate what is reality and what is imagined, but the novel provides hints that indicate which it might be. In the first chapter, entitled “Mythology,” the omniscient narrator focalizes through John Smith, the protagonist, to relate the story of his birth, his immediate removal from his mother and community, and his placement into a white family. John would have had no way of remembering the events of that day since he was a newborn, and he has had no connection to his birth mother, likely the only person who would have shared his sentiments about that day. This raises the question of how to understand this section and its function as an unreliable account. Nancy van Styvendale argues that this chapter is an example of the dislocation of trans/historical trauma (216). Because of the chapter’s label as “Mythology” and its presentation as John’s fantasy rather than the objective truth, and because it is related through a third-person narrator focalizing through John rather than John himself as a first-person narrator, the chapter highlights the dislocation of John from his mother and his roots. Van Styvendale further argues that by imagining his birth, John “returns to the trauma” of his forced removal, and reconstructs it as a “kidnapping” rather than accepting it

as an adoption. While van Styvendale goes on to argue that the purpose of this chapter and its narrative strategies is to show the simultaneous “historical particularity” and “universality” of this trauma, and to prove that trauma is not grounded in a single “event” but is rather trans/historical, I offer a different argument. I argue that by framing the trauma as a kidnapping rather than an adoption, the narrative reconstructs the complicity and the culpability of a range of perpetrators involved, including the government that has imposed such displacement, the doctors and nurses who participated, the transporters who took the baby to the new family, and the white parents who adopted the baby. Because the book makes many references to the fact that the people involved in carrying out such displacement are white people, I will continue to refer to them as such throughout this thesis.⁸

Another possible interpretation of this “Mythology” chapter is that it makes this story of the forced removal a communal one rather than one that is unique to John’s experience. The indefinite vagueness of the descriptions, including the following opening lines, reveals that this particular story could have happened in any number of Indian Health Service hospitals on any reservation: “An Indian Health Service hospital in the late sixties. On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation” (3). Furthermore, the text states, “John’s mother is Navajo or Lakota. She is Apache or Seminole. She is Yakama or Spokane” (4), which emphasizes that this story is not only the specific experience of John and his mother, but could be the experience of many other Native peoples from many different tribes. Therefore, although

⁸ The perpetrators in this list are only the ones involved in the forced removal of Indian children from their families. I will discuss the other kinds of perpetrators (for example the ones who commit violence, perpetuate stereotypes, etc.) later in this section.

the chapter is labeled “Mythology,” which indicates that it lacks complete objectivity and truthfulness, the indeterminateness of the language also portrays it as a widespread, communal experience that many Native people face.

The function of John’s perspective in this chapter is to reject the dominant narrative that white people were trying to “help” Indians by assimilating them into white families, and portray them as kidnappers and criminals instead. The text states that as soon as John comes out of the womb, “the doctor cuts the umbilical cord quickly” (5). This is a literal representation of the ties between John and his mother being cut. Their relationship is being severed in a way that is natural for every birth, but it becomes unnatural when John is rushed out of the room despite his mother’s pleas to keep him: “*I want my baby. Give me my baby. I want to see my baby. Let me hold my baby,*” she cries (5). This repetition of “my baby” emphasizes the fact that it is *her* baby, yet they still take him away from her without any regard for what she wants. John—who is not named by his own mother but by his white adoptive family—is rapidly taken out of the room where a man in a “white jumpsuit” and features that “are hidden inside his white helmet” rushes him into a helicopter and takes him to the white family who adopts him (6). Both the white helmet and the white jumpsuit, along with the hidden features, imply that this person may not be one specific person, but a representation of a larger cohort of white people involved in forcibly removing Indians from their homes and placing them into white families. As Nancy van Styvendale delineates in her article, the novel takes place before the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act, which recognized the “theft, removal, and relocation of Indian children” as a “neocolonial assault” (van Styvendale 210). Therefore, the person in the white helmet and white jumpsuit is the collective embodiment of the people responsible for the “neocolonial assault[s]”

against Indian children. In addition, the birth scene has many indications of a crime scene, as the nurse “washes away the blood, the remains of the placenta, the evidence” (5). Therefore, the language of the text helps frame the white people involved as the perpetrators of the trans/historical trauma that John feels from the moment he is taken away from his mother and throughout the rest of his life.

Before I discuss the various additional kinds of perpetrators that exist within the text, it is crucial to first discuss the concept of rage in the context of Native literature. Arnold Krupat discusses rage within the context of *Indian Killer* itself. He suggests that by incorporating this aspect of rage within many of the characters and demonstrating murderous revenge, Alexie means to produce a “shiver” among white readers who may relate to the white characters in the novel (120). Nancy van Styvendale theorizes rage in *Indian Killer* in addition to *Slash* (1985) by Jeannette Armstrong, and argues that rage both results from trauma and is a method of resisting trauma for Native people (208-209). In *Indian Killer*, John, Marie Polatkin, and Reggie Polatkin all exhibit symptoms of rage. There are several factors that the text presents as the precursors to John’s rage: the trauma he has experienced from being forcibly removed from his mother and the assimilation process of placing him in a primarily white community have led him to experience feelings of inauthenticity as an Indian, which has engendered schizophrenic tendencies and rage. John suffers from intense paranoia, delusions, and hallucinations, which are commonly associated with schizophrenia (“Schizophrenia”). This, in turn, affects his reliability as a

focalizer when he begins to picture things that could not be true.⁹ These schizophrenic tendencies that manifest themselves in John's character throughout the novel represent his feelings of not belonging to either community and not having a real sense of identity.¹⁰ The text therefore suggests that the trauma he has faced may have engendered the paranoia, and the lack of a sense of identity is represented by the multiple voices in his head.

The text also suggests that the trauma in his past and the ongoing racism he faces engender rage and the desire to commit violence. In the beginning of the novel when the book

⁹ For example, John wonders if cockroaches were talking about him to each other, he believed that his adopted parents had been knocking at his door for hours, and he thought he was pregnant (75, 97). Other examples include his obsessive need to have Paul and Paul Too at the donut shop take a bite of his donut and a sip of his coffee so he can be assured that they have not been poisoned (99-100, 304), and his inability to trust something as simple as a chair: "Strange chairs were dangerous for John. They shifted shape, became unrecognizable. Once he learned to trust a chair, it stayed a chair" (303). He often hears music or voices in his head, and throws away the many pills that his adoptive parents try to treat him with: "John knew those pills slowly poisoned him, too. He could take the pills and die young, or ignore the pills and live forever with the music in his head" (74). Aside from his own focalization, we see that others around John also notice his strange behavior. When John is singing in the street and making a scene, an officer states that he is "probably a schizophrenic" (363).

¹⁰ Nancy van Styvendale states in her article that "critics have analyzed John's schizophrenia as a metaphor for the kind of fragmented and tortured subjectivity instilled by deracination" (210).

relates John's experiences in high school, it describes how John would often have to leave class to go into a bathroom stall and "fight against his anger":

He'd bite his tongue, his lips, until sometimes they would bleed. He would hold himself tightly and feel his arms, legs, and lower back shake with the effort. His eyes would be shut. He'd grind his teeth...His struggles with his anger increased in intensity and frequency until he was visiting the bathroom on a daily basis during his senior year (19).

This excerpt shows how his rage is all-consuming, affecting not only his mind but every part of his body. This rage that he suffered from in high school continues to progress as he gets older, and even turns into the desire to commit violence. The first indication comes when he is working as a construction worker on the skyscraper and has the urge to throw the foreman off the edge of the building (24-25). The foreman provokes rage inside John; he "brought the heat and music" in John's head (24). Because of this, John wants to see "fear in blue eyes," and imagines himself letting the foreman fall. After this image, the text states, "John needed to kill a white man" (25). His rage engendered a desire to kill, and he is consumed by this desire throughout the rest of the novel. The text presents his main goal as figuring out "which white man was responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (27). He wonders, "Which white man had done the most harm to the world?" (27). He did not want Indians to be the victims anymore, "he wanted to change that" (30).

The text presents similar feelings of rage in other Indian characters, namely Marie Polatkin and Reggie Polatkin. Marie, an Indian student and activist whom John meets and befriends, takes a class on Native American literature at her university only to have a professor

who teaches the work of white authors who claim to be Indian, or books by Indians that were co-written by white writers (one of which was disavowed by the Indian it was about, yet continuously taught in Native literature classes). The professor, Dr. Clarence Mather, argues that he teaches their work so he can create a positive view of Indians. Among the works that Mather teaches is a book by Jack Wilson, a fictional author who plays a significant role in the novel. Wilson claims he is Indian because of a possible distant Indian relative, but provides no proof that the relation is real. Marie, who rejects the idea that he is actually Indian, avows that Wilson writes books that are “killing Indian books” and provides a long list of Indian authors Mather could have, but failed, to choose from (67-68). When Mather states that he wants people to “recognize the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both Indian and white hands,” the implication is that without white intervention, the work of Indians is not valid (60-61). This is supported by his refusal to include the work of an actual Indian author, despite the fact that there are many. Mather closes the door in Marie’s face when she tries to confront him about these issues, and she feels a sudden, violent urge to “smash the glass, break down the door...tear apart the world” (85). She believes that Mather would never have done that to a male student or a white student. In that moment, “[s]he wanted every white man to disappear. She wanted to burn them all down to ash and feast on their smoke” (85). The text therefore suggests that Mather was the catalyst of the rage inside her, directed towards hundreds of years of white people trying to intervene in Indian work and culture, in the attempt to take it away from them or make it their own.

Similarly, Marie is filled with anger at the fact that Jack Wilson and other white people can claim to be Indian whenever they want, but “she could not be white if she wanted to be

white” (232). When she was younger, she had rubbed her face with sandpaper to get rid of her color; therefore, it angered her that she could not be white when it would have been convenient for her (for example, at job interviews), but a white man could pretend to be Indian to be a successful writer.¹¹ This shows how, as a child, she had internalized the view that darker skin was inferior to whiter skin, a sentiment that turned into anger later in her life. With Mather, “[s]he’d found an emotional outlet in the opportunity to harass a white professor who thought he knew what it meant to be Indian” (61), so she could direct her built up rage towards him.

Reggie Polatkin, Marie’s cousin, also exhibits rage that turns into the desire for violence. Reggie was born to an Indian mother and a white father. His father had abused him for years with the intention of making him a “good” Indian rather than a “dirty Indian” (94). As a result, “[o]ver the years, Reggie had come to believe that he was successful because of his father’s white blood, and that his Indian mother’s blood was to blame for his failures” (94). He had internalized the racist beliefs of his father, and thus avoided anything related to his Indian culture for a long time. This trauma of being abused for years turns into anger and rage later in his life. Once, a white woman he was dating told him she hated Indians, and then Reggie violently had sex with her and tried to get her pregnant with the hope that she would have a brown baby: “He’d wanted to dilute his Indian blood. He’d wanted some kind of revenge. He’d wanted some place to spill his pain” (183). The repetition of “he’d wanted” shows his frustration and desire for revenge. The passage demonstrates his complicated emotions towards being Indian, as he believes it would be some kind of punishment to impregnate a white woman with a brown baby. His violent sexual tendencies are a way for him to exert power over white women and upend the

¹¹ John, too, had “rubbed at his face, wanting to wipe the brown away” (306).

power dynamic that his white father had constructed by repeatedly abusing Reggie and forcing onto him the idea that Indians are inferior. John Smith's outlet for his rage is directed towards finding a white man to kill, Marie's outlet is Professor Mather, and Reggie's outlet is whichever white woman he is dating and attempting to impregnate. Their past and ongoing trauma engender rage and the desire to commit violence, and they each find an outlet for it that never truly satisfies that desire.

Because this rage and desire to commit violence as a response to trauma may appear to "muddy the victim status of the person who has been traumatized by complicating the division between victim and aggressor," van Styvendale argues that rage must be considered as more than just uncontrollable or violent anger (208). When it is theorized as something that stems from trauma, it validates the fact that someone or something is responsible for causing that trauma. Even in Reggie's case in which his sexual assault against his girlfriend is inexcusable, or other cases in which actions go beyond mere desires for violence, this theorization of rage will prevent a one-sided, stereotypical view of Indians as "savages" who must be controlled because it will emphasize the implication of white people in inflicting the trauma that got them to that point. After all, victims do not have to be completely innocent in order to remain victims of trauma. The text does not mean to imply that Reggie is guilt-free just because he is a victim, but instead shows the drastic effects that the trauma had on him that led him to perpetrate inexcusable assault.

The Indian Killer character is fueled by similar rage and a desire for violence against white people. The Indian Killer is an anonymous person (or entity) who is responsible for the murders of various white victims in the city. In each chapter presented through the killer's

focalization, the text only refers to the character as “the killer” or “it” rather than with a male or female pronoun. There are two possible interpretations for this unconventional narrative choice. The first is that the Indian Killer is, in a way, an embodiment that represents parts of each main Indian character: John, Marie, and Reggie. Nancy van Styvendale claims that the killer provides a form to the rage that the Indian characters feel, while also giving a shape to the collective trauma that is larger than the individual. Thus, the text presents this figure as a “collective victim” that becomes a perpetrator in response to years of pent-up anger for the injustices that Native people face. The second possible interpretation is that by referring to the killer as “it” rather than as a person, the text detaches the killer’s agency from any actual person. The killer figure thus becomes an outlet for expressing anger towards white people without having to place the blame for these actions on any Indian character. The ambiguity of the term “Indian Killer” also supports this interpretation, as it could mean one who kills Indians or an Indian who is a killer. By choosing this ambiguous term as the title of the book, Alexie initially draws attention to the killers of Indians, which forces people to consider this aspect before realizing that it is most likely an Indian who is killing people. The name of the killer thus prevents a one-sided view of Indians killing people, and sets readers up to see the other side of it as well. In this way, the text presents the Indian Killer as a collective victim-turned-perpetrator that is made up of parts of each character, but simultaneously as no specific person at all, making it an unconventional figure. How does the text address the question of culpability of such a figure?

The novel presents not only the violence carried out by the Indian Killer, but also those perpetrated by white characters against Indians. Aaron Rodgers is one of these people. Aaron is a violent white man who attempts to shoot Indians who trespass on his property, and feels

“giddiness” when he sees that Indians are approaching his land, meaning that he can shoot them. He wonders “if this was how the great Indian-fighters, like Custer, Sheridan, and Wright, had felt just before battle” (63). Custer, Sheridan, and Wright were military officers who fought against and killed Native people in the Indian Wars, and Sheridan is the man who many lexicographers credit with the saying, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” (Mieder 42).¹² Later, when his brother goes missing at a casino and he believes the Indian Killer is responsible, he attacks innocent homeless Indians in retaliation.

Another character named Truck Schultz, a white radio host and outright bigot, has long racist rants after the Indian Killer starts murdering white people in the city. He also paraphrases the “great” Philip Sheridan and says, “The only good Indian Killer is a dead Indian Killer” (209). Although he does not actually commit violence, his hate speech has a similar effect. He discusses his belief that white people are the victims even after the “great” things they have done like “tam[ing] the wilderness” (207). What he is referring to is the genocide of Native peoples, when America attempted to “tame” them by murdering them and then tried to assimilate whoever was left. He calls the Indian Killer an Indian “savage,” which perpetuates a common racist stereotype and overlooks the fact that white people acted as the real “savages” in the wars against Indians. In addition, Truck Schultz refers to his listeners as “citizens,” and repeats this term many times throughout his rants. By doing so, he is implying that only white people—his listeners—are the “citizens” he considers important. In a way, he is attempting to unite them against the Indians by igniting the patriotism and prejudice in his listeners.

¹² The proverbial nature of this quote made it a catchphrase that was used to justify the murder of thousands of Indians, and its use continued for many years after (Mieder 42-43).

In addition to these two obvious perpetrators of violence or bigotry, the text also presents more common, “ordinary” perpetrators of ongoing racism, cultural appropriation, or stereotyping. The character Jack Wilson—the novelist and fraud who claims to be Indian—often appropriates and perpetuates stereotypes about Indian people, which is a more discreet form of modern racism in comparison to Truck Schultz’s explicit racism. Wilson began to write novels about Indians, and loved the fame and attention he received from it (162). He profits from the appropriation of their culture and from perpetuating common stereotypes. He would often go to Big Heart, a bar predominantly visited by Indians, and pick up “bits of stray information for his novels” (180). He thinks about naming his next novel “Savage Revenge,” which once again uses the racist stereotype that Indians are savages. At one of his book readings, a protester holds up a sign that says, “Only Indians Should Tell Indian Stories,” which shows how Indians are tired of having white people appropriate and exploit their voices and culture for their own benefit (263). John becomes aware of what Jack Wilson does after Marie, who despises Jack Wilson, shares these sentiments with John. John’s anger towards Jack Wilson stems from his feelings of inauthenticity and of being “less than real,” and the fact that Jack is able to feel like a real Indian (even though he is not) when John cannot do the same.

This book, which falls under the genre of murder mystery, is framed like most murder mysteries in that it depicts a killer with an unknown identity. Readers who are familiar with this genre expect a resolution at the end, an answer that finally reveals who the killer is. Alexie, however, employs the conventions of this genre and then subverts them by choosing to not reveal the identity of the Indian Killer. Although there are hints in the text that lead readers to develop their own theories, the story ultimately lacks the big reveal that would have identified who the

Indian Killer was. Instead, the big reveal at the end involves John's unveiling of the white man whom he sees as ultimately responsible for Natives' suffering. From early on in the novel, John had been consumed with the idea of determining who would fit that description, and in the end decides it is Jack Wilson. Yet, it is clearly futile to hold one man responsible for all of the past and current trauma of Indians. What is the novel suggesting by giving so much significance to the figure of Wilson? By revealing Wilson as the white man responsible, the novel challenges readers to consider the issue of perpetration more broadly. Instead of focusing on the perpetrators of violence, the text highlights the "ordinary" perpetrators who are more common and widespread, and are often not considered "perpetrators" at all. These people could fall under Michael Rothberg's theory of "implicated subjects" which I discussed in the introduction, in which people who are not technically perpetrators of violence still participate in racism and oppression in a more indirect way ("Trauma Theory"). In this way, perpetrators of ongoing racism, cultural appropriation, and stereotyping are revealed as just as harmful as perpetrators of violence. By subverting the genre of the murder mystery, the text not only leaves out the identity of the perpetrator, but also reveals that the definition of "perpetrators" extends farther than those who commit violence and includes various kinds of implicated subjects.

Beloved: The Aftermath of Slavery

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a "formative text in literary trauma studies," takes place during and directly after the period of slavery and the Civil War in the United States (Luckhurst 90). Based on the true story of Margaret Garner, the protagonist, Sethe, is a former slave who escapes with her children only to be found twenty-eight days later by her slave owner and abuser. Rather than allowing the slave owner, called "schoolteacher," to retrieve her and her children, she murders her infant daughter and attempts to kill the other children and herself. Before these pivotal events are revealed, the novel relates the traumatic experiences of slavery—which include dehumanization as well as physical and mental abuse—and uniquely presents the psychological impact of such trauma through the narrative strategies it employs.¹³ Toni Morrison writes in the foreword of the novel that, after reading about the story of Margaret Garner, she wanted to write this novel to "invent [Margaret's] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues" (xi). By taking historical news and turning it into a novel, Morrison was able to throw the reader "ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the

¹³ Alan Gibbs discusses how *Beloved* and a few other books helped to formulate the conventions of trauma literature, which include temporal disruptions such as fragmentation, non-linear chronology, shifts in narrating voice, etc. for the purpose of "represent[ing] or attempt[ing] to transmit trauma." He argues that while these early books "employed a pioneering aesthetic to politically radical effect," the effects of these techniques were diminished after writers began copying these techniques and critics began recognizing them as conventional (27).

book's population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (xii).

In this section of my thesis, I will answer the following questions: What are the functions of the unconventional narrative strategies in relating the experiences of trauma? What are the implications of the systemic trauma that the text presents for how we assess a victim who has become a perpetrator? Upon reflection on these questions, I will argue that the novel presents a many-sided view of Sethe's act of perpetration but does not answer the question of her culpability. Instead, the text, like *Indian Killer*, highlights the responsibility of other kinds of perpetrators who are not technically “perpetrators” by definition (meaning they do not commit violence towards another person) but are implicated in the projection of racism, oppression, or trauma in a more indirect way.

It is difficult to identify one single genre that *Beloved* would be classified under because it contains elements that comply with various different genres. Because it is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, it could be considered historical fiction. However, the magical element of Beloved returning as a ghost and then a human embodiment complicates the novel's classification as historical fiction and renders the genre part magical realism or gothic fiction. The most accurate classification, however, is its standing as a neoslave narrative. Yogita Goyal suggests that one of the functions of neoslave narratives is to “generat[e] a fuller consciousness of the past as with the transmission of memory in the present” (148). She argues that while historical accounts can provide factual information about slavery, “imaginative literature” in the form of neoslave narratives can capture what the slaves thought and felt (150). However, most

neoslave narratives, like *Beloved*, also reveal the difficulty of attempting to relate the experience of trauma and the truth of slavery.

As I discussed earlier in the introduction, the trauma of slavery can be characterized as insidious trauma, which describes traumatic situations that are a part of everyday life (Brown 107). However, this does not imply that event-based trauma does not also exist within these situations. In the novel, in addition to the insidious trauma of living within and being a victim of the oppressive system of slavery, there are various singular events that have a traumatic impact on the victim. Schoolteacher and his nephews, the “conventional” perpetrators who run the plantation and control the slaves, subject Sethe, Paul D, and other slaves to dehumanization.¹⁴

Aside from the overall dehumanization of being a slave who is considered property rather than a person, Sethe relates an experience that is especially traumatic for her. Although most of the novel is in the third-person omniscient perspective with varying focalizers, the text shares this experience from Sethe’s first-person perspective and directs her words to Beloved even though Beloved is not physically there with her. She expresses that this is the first time she has ever been able to share this experience, and she is only doing so in an attempt to “explain” to Beloved what she went through that made her kill her. She explains how she discovered that schoolteacher and his nephews were measuring her physical features and comparing them with animals. She had overheard schoolteacher saying, “I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animals ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228). The text presents this horrifying dehumanization as an experience that she could not share with anyone for years.

¹⁴ I say they are “conventional” perpetrators here as opposed to “unconventional” perpetrators that I will explain later in this section.

Several times throughout the novel, however, the text hints at these traumatic experiences, but does not fully share them. Near the beginning of the novel, Sethe was speaking to Denver about how schoolteacher had a book that he would write in every night after asking them questions and observing them, and hints that she still believes “it was them questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for all time” (44).¹⁵ This method of partially referring to certain events before being able to share them later in the novel mimics the theory of trauma that trauma is experienced belatedly and through circularly revisiting the experience of the event.¹⁶ Many scholars have already written about how *Beloved*'s structure is meant to mimic the experience, belatedness, and cyclical nature of trauma.¹⁷ My main focus is to present the trauma that Sethe and other characters face in order to demonstrate how the text suggests we interpret Sethe's culpability as a victim who has become a perpetrator.

The text also reveals the dehumanization that Paul D experienced—both from schoolteacher and from his time in the chain gang after abolition—in order to provide more insight into the traumatic experiences of other slaves besides Sethe and an example of the trans/historicity of their trauma. Paul D relates this experience one night in a conversation with Sethe, and says that schoolteacher had put an iron bit in his mouth. Not only was the iron bit dehumanizing—since they are typically used for animals—but worst of all, he felt inferior to the roosters that were walking freely near him: “[The rooster] was allowed to be and stay what he

¹⁵ Sixo was another one of the slaves at the Sweet Home plantation, who was later burned to death by schoolteacher.

¹⁶ Cathy Caruth theorized this in “Introduction” and *Unclaimed Experience*.

¹⁷ See Roger Luckhurst, Kristin Boudreau, Lynda Koolish, Claudine Raynaud, or Anne Koenen.

was. But I wasn't... Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (86). This excerpt reveals how the dehumanization he experienced stripped him of his sense of self. Another experience with dehumanization was when Paul D was in the chain gang shortly after the emancipation of slaves, forced to sleep inside a box underground. A rope was connected to his neck and iron was clamped around his ankles and wrists as if he was some kind of wild animal (125). The box is described as a cage underground, in which "anything that crawled or scurried" could share it. This demonstrates how Paul D felt in that moment that his worth was equivalent to that of vermin. He also felt so dehumanized that he felt he had lost control of his own hands (126). Paul D's experience in the chain gang is a way of shedding light on other kinds of perpetrators: specifically, the agents of the state that controlled the chain gang. The white men watching over the chain gang would ridicule, mistreat, and beat the black men (126-128). Paul D's time in the chain gang reflects the trans/historical aspect of the book: although slavery is technically over, he continues to face traumatic forms of oppression, or as Douglas Blackmon calls it, "slavery by another name" (Blackmon). Even though *Beloved* takes place in a more historical period than *Indian Killer*, it still crosses the temporal divide between slavery and abolition. It also thematizes the crossing of a spatial divide by emphasizing the significance of the Fugitive Slave Law, which allowed slaveowners like schoolteacher to pursue their runaway slaves beyond the slave-holding state.

These two experiences of Paul D's are shared in the text in different ways. Paul D shares the first experience with the iron bit with Sethe, and a third-person omniscient narrator observes this conversation and shares the emotions of both Sethe and Paul D. The narrator reveals Paul D's thoughts that what he shared was only a small segment of what he experienced, and "[h]e

would keep the rest...in that tobacco tin buried in his chest” where he kept traumatic memories he could not bear to face (86). Sethe’s thoughts shortly after are that they are doing their usual work of “beating back the past,” which implies that she also has difficulties facing her past trauma (86). Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that Paul D is unable to share his full experience with Sethe, as he has trouble facing it himself. By contrast, the second experience from the chain gang is revealed through Paul D’s focalization rather than as a dialogue with Sethe or anyone else. The representation of this second experience through his focalization is more complete than what he shared with Sethe, as it covers a larger portion of the trauma he experienced up until he was able to leave that situation. Thus, the text reveals the difficulties of sharing and evoking the experience of trauma, and the narrative strategy of relating these experiences in different ways attempts to illustrate that.

In addition to dehumanization, the text presents the trauma of mother-child separation as one that deeply affects the characters. Four chapters towards the end of the book (pps. 236-256) take on the first-person points of view of Sethe, her surviving daughter Denver, Beloved, and then Beloved again. I will mainly focus on Sethe’s chapter and Beloved’s first chapter, though I incorporate a line from Denver’s chapter. These chapters reveal the love between Sethe and Beloved and the trauma of mother-child separation in an attempt to provide Sethe’s justification for her act of perpetration while, at the same time, preventing full identification of the reader with Sethe.

In Sethe’s chapter, she once again addresses the traumatic moment at Sweet Home when schoolteacher and his nephews assaulted her and stole her breast milk.¹⁸ She states, “They held

¹⁸ She relates this experience earlier in the novel with Paul D (19).

me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby” (236). This simultaneously literal and symbolic stealing of her milk represents the attempted theft of motherhood for Sethe, as “milk” in the novel serves as a reoccurring motif for motherhood. A different level of mother-child separation is at play here; although they are not taking away her baby, they are stealing a crucial part of her motherhood, which is the ability to feed and care for her child like a mother should. Even though it is her own breast milk, she states that it “belonged to [her] baby,” which shows that she cared more about the fact that they took it from her baby than the fact that they assaulted and took it from her. For Sethe, her own mother was not able to breastfeed or take care of her, so a woman named “Nan had to nurse whitebabies and [her] too...The little whitebabies got it first and [she] got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call [her] own” (236).¹⁹ What she detested most about her assault was that white people took her milk before her daughter could, which repeats what happened with her own mother. She adds, “I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you, to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little

¹⁹ There are several parallels between Sethe and her mother, and Sethe and Beloved. One is that Sethe’s mother also committed infanticide. She was impregnated on a boat to America many times by the white crew. She threw all the white babies off the boat, except Sethe, who had a black father (74). Another time, Sethe’s mother showed her a mark that the slaveowners had branded onto her skin. When Sethe said she wanted one too (in an effort to have a connection with her mother), her mother slapped her (72). The implication of this scene is that Sethe’s mother knew what it meant to have that mark, and did not want her daughter to be branded property, as well. Similarly, Sethe does not want Beloved to be the property of the slaveowners, and therefore kills her to “protect” her.

left” (236). Thus, this passage shows the significance of the mother-child connection that is stripped away in slavery.

In her first-person narration Sethe also states that she told Baby Suggs—her mother-in-law who lived in freedom with Sethe and her children for a short while before she died—that she would not live without her children, and Baby Suggs “got down on her knees to beg God’s pardon for [her]” (240). Baby Suggs has felt the traumatic loss of separation from each one of her eight children, and therefore knows more than anyone that it is dangerous to love. Although one could argue that Baby Suggs has given in to the violence of slavery in some sense by believing this, she does not actually prevent herself from loving her children. In fact, this might even be her method of resisting the system of slavery that attempts to prevent slaves from having relationships with their children or loved ones. Nevertheless, she and many other characters in the novel must feel the trauma of losing the ones they love. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates Sethe’s love for her children and the trauma that Sethe suffers, both in the separation from her own mother and from the thought that schoolteacher had stolen her ability to be a mother to Beloved.

The chapter from Beloved’s perspective also reveals the complicated emotions of adoration for her mother and disappointment that Sethe “left” her (252). Some scholars argue that people who die cannot be considered traumatized, because being traumatized implies a mode of “living on” (Lloyd 219-20; Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 138). Though I agree with this, I believe that Beloved’s return and embodiment as both a ghost and then a human being allows her to be considered a victim of trauma, as she displays the emotions and characteristics of a live person. The first chapter in her point of view is written in a fragmented format. The whole

chapter lacks punctuation and the combined fragments convey disjointed images. This fragmented narrative mirrors the fragmentation of her life, cut short and then continued as a ghost and then as a human embodiment. In this chapter, we see Beloved's longing to be with Sethe, yet also her accusations against Sethe. She states, "I cannot lose her again...I follow her... I reach for her...Her smiling face is the place for me" (250-252). Yet, she blames Sethe as "the face that left me" (252). The phrasing of this sentence suggests that Sethe had the choice, and she chose to leave her. It does not account for the fact that Sethe felt she had no choice. Thus, Beloved's perspective reveals the varying emotions she feels as a result of being forcibly separated from her mother. She longs for a connection to her mother, but blames Sethe for "leaving" her.

The chapters from Sethe's and Beloved's perspectives work together to show the individual perspectives of the characters on Sethe's act of perpetration. Sethe shares her emotions about the trauma that schoolteacher and his nephews had put her through, which shows why she felt she had to kill her daughter to protect her from them. She reveals Paul D's perspective, that there must have been "some other way," but sarcastically responds in her mind with, "Let schoolteacher haul us away, I guess, to measure your behind before he tore it up?" (239). Here she is referring to the fact that schoolteacher was measuring her body parts so that he could compare her to an animal—the act of dehumanization so appalling that she refused to risk that her daughter might experience that, even if it meant killing her to protect her. In this way, the text provides Sethe's justification for her act of violence. However, the text does not allow for merely a one-sided justification from the perpetrator. Beloved, Denver, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, and the rest of the community express their disapproval of Sethe's crime. Towards the end of the

book, *Beloved* and Sethe spiral into madness as *Beloved* incessantly blames Sethe for taking her life. Denver—in the chapter from her perspective, strategically placed between Sethe's and *Beloved*'s—also expresses her love for, yet fear of, her mother because she killed one of her own (242). These varying perspectives on Sethe's culpability reveal the complicated empathy that arises for a character who is the perpetrator of a horrible crime, yet is also a victim of the trauma of slavery that led her to do it. The text thus prevents full identification with Sethe, yet simultaneously shows her justification for why she did it: the traumatic conditions of the institution of slavery, which are so appalling that murdering her daughter is better than allowing her to suffer through the assaults and dehumanization that she suffered. In this way, the text reveals multiple perspectives on the moral question of Sethe's culpability, rather than suggesting that one side or the other is the ethical one.

However, in this novel, as in *Indian Killer*, the novel also raises the question of the culpability of different kinds of perpetrators. First, there are the conventional perpetrators, who are the slaveholders: schoolteacher and his nephews. The name "schoolteacher" for an abusive slaveholder is ironic because schoolteachers are not typically considered horrible people. Sima Farshid suggests that Morrison omits the names of schoolteacher and his nephews in order to dehumanize them the same way they have dehumanized the slaves, and to "diminish them derisively to the level of nonhuman creatures that merely function as the agents of inhuman forces of slavery" (22). However, I argue that this narrative choice has a different purpose: his abusive racism expressed through his role as a schoolteacher emphasizes the normality and ordinariness of racism in the society. Pedagogy and the production of knowledge were implicated in racism. Schoolteacher is studying the slaves' characteristics in the name of "science," but

science and other fields were embedded in racist world views. This choice shows how the perpetrators were not inhuman “other” figures, but rather normal people, like teachers, who were capable of horrible things. *Indian Killer* employs a similar strategy by highlighting the “regularity” of its unconventional perpetrators. The difference here, though, is that schoolteacher is an actual perpetrator of violence, while Jack Wilson in *Indian Killer* does not actually commit violence, but is still complicit in inflicting some kind of trauma.

In addition to the victim who has become a perpetrator and the more conventional perpetrators like schoolteacher and his nephews, the text draws attention to the characters who present themselves as good people, but are actually complicit in the perpetration of racism. Mr. Garner, for example, was the former slaveholder of Sweet Home before schoolteacher came. He serves as a stark contrast to schoolteacher because he did not outwardly abuse the slaves the way schoolteacher did, but nevertheless he still owned them and forced them to work against their will. In addition, Sethe’s husband Halle had to work an immense number of extra hours to earn money to free his elderly mother, Baby Suggs. Garner believed that he was being a good person by agreeing to give Baby Suggs her freedom, but he only made this possible if Halle worked grueling hours to free an elderly woman who “walk[ed] like a three-legged dog” and was barely useful to Garner anymore (166). Therefore, just because he did not physically abuse his slaves did not excuse the fact that he was still participating in the oppressive system of slavery.

Other less conventional “perpetrators” in the text are the Bodwins, abolitionists who help runaway slaves escape and reach freedom. While the narrative generally depicts them in positive terms, it also reveals that they have a racist, caricatured figurine in their home depicting a black boy on his knees with bulging eyes, hair that was “a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made

of nail heads,” and a red gaping mouth. At the bottom of the figurine were the words “At Yo Service” (301). The fact that they own and display such a figurine that mocks black people (in a room that many black people in the community visit), shows that they are implicated in the perpetration of racism in a more indirect way even though they do not perpetrate violence and actively oppose slavery.

The Black community that Sethe is a part of after slavery also consists of implicated subjects, and the text suggests that they may be held partially responsible for the fate of Sethe and Beloved. Shortly after Sethe arrives at Baby Suggs’ house after escaping the plantation, Baby Suggs holds a feast for the whole community. The members of the community become spiteful and angry that the feast was so abundant because they believe it displayed Baby Suggs’ “reckless generosity” and “uncalled-for pride” (162). The anger also stemmed from the fact that they believed Baby Suggs had an easier path to freedom than they did, as her son bought her freedom and her owner drove her to her new two-story house (161-162). As a result of these spiteful feelings, the members of the community did not warn Sethe that schoolteacher was approaching her house to take her and her children back to slavery. If they had warned her, she could have escaped instead of being trapped in the situation that led her to kill her daughter. The novel reveals the community’s neglectful actions through Stamp Paid’s focalization. He thinks about how he and Baby Suggs had missed schoolteacher approaching because they were looking the other way, and how the community had known they were approaching because “the riders asked questions” to find Sethe (184). And yet, Stamp Paid contemplates:

[N]ot anybody ran down or to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along

with his ma'am's tit. Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public.

Nobody warned them... (185)

This excerpt demonstrates that the members of the community knew that schoolteacher's arrival meant harm, but they neglected to warn Sethe anyway. In this way, the text implies that the members of the community do hold some level of responsibility for failing to warn Sethe due to their jealousy and spite. While Morrison is not attempting to compare the community's sin of omission to the undeniable perpetration by the slave owners, the text does highlight the fact that even good people can be implicated in this racist structure without realizing it. Although Stamp Paid and the Bodwins are considered positive characters, the Bodwins' inability to recognize their implication serves as a stark contrast to Stamp, who recognizes, fears, and feels guilty about his own minor involvement in Sethe's fate.

In this section I have argued that the unconventional narrative strategies of the text function to mimic and represent the experiences of trauma that the characters face in slavery. The text presents the various traumatic experiences in a way that attempts to mimic them in order to provide background for why Sethe committed her act of violence. However, instead of using these accounts of trauma to excuse her actions, the text also provides various perspectives on her act of infanticide to prevent a one-sided view of her justification. By omitting a clear answer to the question of her culpability, the text leaves room to question the responsibility of other kinds of "perpetrators" in the text. Although these unconventional "perpetrators" are not directly connected to acts of violence, they are implicated in the indirect perpetration of racism and trauma. Therefore, the text suggests that even though implicated subjects deviate from

conventional understandings of what “perpetrators” are, they are capable of being as harmful as actual perpetrators of violence, albeit in more indirect ways.

Conclusion

After examining *Indian Killer* and *Beloved* on their own, a comparison of the two can shed light on new ways of thinking about trauma, perpetrators, and responsibility for acts of violence. *Indian Killer* and *Beloved* both represent the effects of trans/historical trauma, though they do so in different ways. While there is a larger gap between the originary trauma of Native people and the 1960s setting of *Indian Killer* in which traumatic events persist in a different form, the trans/historical trauma in *Beloved* is limited to a shorter period of time—during and directly after slavery. However, comparing the two different forms of trans/historical trauma demonstrates that ongoing trauma can persist in both obvious and subtle ways. For example, the trans/historical trauma in *Beloved* is unmistakable through Paul D's horrifying experience in the chain gang right after emancipation. In *Indian Killer*, however, the trans/historical trauma can be seen through more subtle attacks like "casual racism," which consists of perpetuating harmful stereotypes or ignorantly appropriating a culture's customs as Jack Wilson and other characters do ("Casual Racism"). Despite the differences in the form of trauma, an overarching comparison of the two novels reveals that both the obvious and the more subtle attacks can have drastic effects on victims.

In depicting the trauma that the characters face, both novels take up the scenario of a victim of trauma who has become a perpetrator. While in *Beloved* that character is an actual person, Sethe, who kills her daughter in order to save her from returning to slavery, the victim-turned-perpetrator in *Indian Killer* is more abstract: an unnamed, genderless killer that represents the collective embodiment of Native victims of trauma, or—because of its lack of identification or gender—an outlet for anger that prevents the placement of blame for the murders on any

individual Indian. In addition to this abstract figure, however, there are various characters who exhibit strong desires to commit violence against white people. While Beloved's murder is Sethe's attempt to protect her child from what she considers a fate worse than death, the acts of perpetration in *Indian Killer* are vengeful products of built-up anger towards random white victims. What Alexie suggests by emphasizing this randomness is that responsibility for trauma is systematic and not simply the product of a small number of people. Though the motivations behind the murders in these two novels are evidently very different, both novels ultimately move the focus away from whether or not the victims-turned-perpetrators should be held responsible for their actions. Instead, they emphasize the trauma that has led them to those moments of violence in order to show how trauma can affect people in extreme circumstances. The novels make the point that being a victim does not imply perfection or innocence, and therefore readers do not have to determine the degree of responsibility of the victims-turned-perpetrators. Although they are undoubtedly victims of trauma, they still took the lives of others, which makes them not completely innocent. Therefore, the novels demonstrate that trauma complicates the dichotomy of "innocent vs. guilty."

The notion of responsibility as implication also challenges the innocence/guilt binary. The novels indicate that responsibility extends farther than the perpetrators directly involved in the crime, and that it includes those involved in the perpetration of trauma in more indirect ways. They show that trauma does not end after the original historical moments of the trauma, but rather lives on and is reproduced by implicated subjects in the form of racial injustices and the perpetuation of stereotypes. By highlighting the various kinds of "ordinary" people who are

implicated without even realizing it, the novels challenge readers to consider if they are ever implicated in similar ways.

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