

# Navigating the Temporal Landscape of Trauma

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## ABSTRACT

Trauma transforms time and narrative. Psychological trauma, the overwhelming mental response to distressing events, distorts the manner in which its victim perceives and experiences time. The representation of trauma is not uniform. Authors use different approaches to speak the unspeakable, to remember the unrememberable. This paper examines three novels and their depiction of time after trauma: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Readings of these three novels engage with one another, enhancing the ways in which trauma can be understood. The synthesis of philosophical, scientific, and literary frameworks provides the multifaceted and necessary lens through which to examine the narrative of trauma. In each of these three novels, trauma leaves a mark—a remainder—that the passage of time cannot erase, and that even the altered temporal frameworks cannot fully represent.

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## Introduction

Trauma transforms time and narrative. Psychological trauma, the overwhelming mental response to distressing events, distorts the manner in which its victim perceives and experiences time. Time may seem “to be stretching out and speeding by simultaneously” (Gusich 513). As the traumatized navigate their memories, certain fragments of experiences may be repressed or resurfaced (Di-Capua 2). Temporal distortions, and often analogous spatial ones as well, accompany new frameworks of understanding time after trauma.

Multiple theoretical frameworks illuminate the complexities of trauma’s temporal implications. Literary trauma theory, drawing from clinical psychology, examines how trauma interferes with memory and identity. According to literary trauma theory, the traumatic experience is “repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable” (Balaev 151). In this light, the unspoken details and temporal distortions within a trauma narrative point back to the traumatic event without ever being able to represent it fully. Trauma can also be viewed through the lens of neuroscience, which provides physiological explanations for psychological phenomena. Neuroscience reveals the brain’s systems of memory formation and retrieval, clarifying the mechanisms in which trauma can alter memory and the sense of time. Time can also be understood through different philosophical paradigms. The typical human experience of time involves a flow of past, present, and future. This aligns with the A-theory of time, which asserts that these three temporal properties uniquely demarcate time. In contrast, the B-theory of time posits that the flow of time is an illusion. According to B-theory, the notions of “past,” “present,” and “future” are merely perspectival—temporal analogs to spatial terms such as “here” or “there” (Deng 713). B-theory transforms time into a spatialized landscape, traversed by trauma survivors in their unique ways. The representation of trauma is not

uniform. Authors use different approaches to speak the unspeakable, to remember the unrememberable. The synthesis of these philosophical, scientific, and literary frameworks provides the multifaceted and necessary lens through which to examine the narrative of trauma.

This paper examines three novels and their depiction of time after trauma: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In each of these novels, temporal distortions pervade the narrative. *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts Billy Pilgrim's trauma from witnessing the bombing of Dresden in World War II, mirroring Vonnegut's own wartime experiences. Via time travel, Billy navigates through a spatialized temporal landscape. In *Remainder*, the unnamed narrator experiences an unspeakable accident which injures his head. After the event, he obsessively recreates particular spaces and compulsively reenacts certain motions within these spaces. *Beloved* also interweaves time and space through the story of Sethe, an escaped slave whose haunting memories of slavery suffuse the space of her present. Places take on memories that exist outside the flow of time. Whereas *Slaughterhouse-Five* spatializes time, *Beloved* temporalizes space. *Remainder*, in contrast, creates cyclical spaces of suspended time.

Readings of these three novels engage with one another, enhancing the ways in which trauma can be understood. *Slaughterhouse-Five* exemplifies a "trauma novel," conveying the intense sense of loss from war and illuminating "new perceptions of the self and world" (Balaev 150). *Remainder*, on the other hand, constructs a "counter-trauma novel," a postmodern "confrontation with trauma fiction" (Vermeulen 550). Whereas *Slaughterhouse-Five* paints a riveting picture of wartime trauma, *Remainder* reshapes the trauma novel with a narrative detached from emotion and subject. However, a reading of *Beloved* responds to *Remainder*'s lack of subjectivity; although published decades earlier, *Beloved* continues to speak to our present, representing personal and collective traumas with

profound feeling. In each of these three novels, trauma leaves a mark—a remainder—that the passage of time cannot erase, and that even the altered temporal frameworks cannot fully represent.

### ***Slaughterhouse-Five*: trauma novel**

“So it goes,” says Vonnegut-as-narrator, delivering the infamous line of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that follows each occurrence of death. Death permeates the novel. Claiming to write a “Dresden book” (Vonnegut 4), the author-narrator weaves the bombing of Dresden and traumatic experiences from World Word II into the post-war memories of Billy Pilgrim. The nonlinear structure of the novel couples with Billy’s scrambled sense of temporality. Billy does not experience the progression of past, present, and future; rather, he comes “unstuck” between moments of time. The novel describes Billy’s first experience with time travel behind Nazi lines:

This was when Billy first came unstuck in time. His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light. There wasn’t anybody else there, or any thing...And then Billy swung into life again, going backwards until he was in pre-birth, which was red light and bubbling sounds. (43)

As Billy’s attention swings through the “full arc of his life,” the novel describes him bouncing between 1965, 1958, 1961, and 1944. The emergence of Billy’s time travel during the war suggests the role of wartime trauma in catalyzing his disjointed sense of time. Billy has no control over where he goes. He passively drifts along collaged currents of time, just as the American prisoners of war “flow” like liquid channeled into ad hoc prisons by their captors (80). Billy is an audience, not an agent of his life. Transported between different places in time, Billy is as helpless to change their events as he is to turn the death tide of war.



Billy's experience of time can be explained with the help of aliens from Tralfamadore. Billy claims that he was kidnapped by these higher-dimensional beings, who revealed to him the true nature of time. One of them explains,

I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings for explanations. It simply *is*. (85-86).

The Tralfamadorians view time as a spatially represented dimension, as a traversable landscape beyond the typical human experience. Their temporal framework aligns with the B-theory of time. All times exist and are equally real—in Tralfamadorian words, “all time is all time.” Within the B-theoretical framework, time is tenseless. Each event exists at a position in the temporal dimension, relative to the temporal positioning of other events. Thus, viewed in light of B-theory, Billy's time travel can be understood as a repositioning around a temporal landscape. Yet even though all times are equal, humans are handicapped time travelers, experiencing different temporal positions unequally. The Tralfamadorians liken time to a terrain, at which Earthlings can only peer through the end of a pipe. Earthlings are also bolted to a flatcar on rails, described thus:

The flatcar sometimes crept, sometimes went extremely fast, often stopped—went uphill, downhill, around curves, along straightaways. Whatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, “That's life.” (115).

In Billy's case the flatcar may be jerking back and forth, halting at various points on the track of his life, its wheels “coming unstuck” as it transports him from place to place. The novel utilizes B-theory in its Tralfamadorian view of time, aiding in understanding Billy's altered temporal framework from the war.

Although Billy claims that he first time-traveled in 1944, it is decades later, after a plane crash in 1968, when he first speaks of his travels through time and to Tralfamadore. His daughter reacts to his revelations with skepticism—she thinks him senile “because of damage to his brain in the airplane crash” (28). Her skepticism is well-founded; studies in neuroscience have linked traumatic brain injury with impaired memory. Additionally, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have been shown to be more prevalent among brain injury victims with memory of the trauma (Klein 31). In light of Billy’s extensive surgery and coma in the novel, it is likely that the crash damaged the areas of memory retrieval in his brain. According to researchers on the neural mechanisms of memory distortion, the brain may erroneously link new information with a retrieved memory. Imagination can also be confused with memory, as imagining an event can generate a sense of familiarity that mimics genuine memory (St. Jacques 19671). Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* through the lens of neuroscience, it is plausible for Billy’s time-travel to be purely psychological, and for the Tralfamadoreans to be fictitious figments, encoded by an erroneous brain that binds science-fiction to real events. At the same time, Billy retains genuine memories of the plane crash. The physical trauma of the crash couples with the psychological trauma of losing his wife and father-in-law due to the event, triggering deep-rooted trauma from the brutality of war, and further manifesting post-traumatic stress in the form of temporal distortions.

Billy’s altered temporal framework numbs the traumatic pain of death. The spatialization of time provides the possibility that death can be circumnavigated. When Billy meets a fatherless boy, Billy assures him that “his father was very much alive still in moments the boy would see again and again” (Vonnegut 135). Death inevitably exists, but it is happening elsewhere on the temporal landscape. The event of death itself may be unpleasant, but it can be experientially avoided. In Billy’s

words, “Isn’t that comforting?” (135). Billy’s temporal distortions culminate in the nullification of death’s gravitas. Billy claims know the circumstances of his own death:

He has seen his own death many times, has described it to a tape recorder...he says.

*I, Billy Pilgrim, the tape begins, will die, have died, and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976.*

At the time of his death, he says, he is in Chicago to address a large crowd on the subject of flying saucers and the true nature of time...“If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I’ve said.” Now he closes his speech as he closes every speech—with these words: “Farewell, hello, farewell, hello.” (142)

Vonnegut’s repetition of “he says” in this scene hints at skepticism towards Billy’s claims. Yet in Billy’s mind, he envisions himself facing death with tranquil acceptance. Personal tragedies and wartime horrors are soothed with the thought that death is no longer “terrible.” Billy’s vision of the future is notably in present tense—he “is” in Chicago, his speech closes “now.” The difference in tense from the rest of the novel emphasizes the immediacy of the scene, as if suspended in time—in the words of the Tralfamadorians, “trapped in the amber of this moment” (77). Billy may have triumphed over death, but it is a resigned triumph. The event of death still exists, to be experienced again and again. Billy’s passive acceptance of events within his life resembles the passivity of his time travel. Vonnegut-as-narrator voices Billy’s powerlessness: “Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (60). A-theory’s flow of time has abandoned Billy; he cannot alter it, nor fully participate in it. Instead, the B-theoretical framework reshapes his narrative and provides comfort. As the Tralfamadorians assert, “There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects” (88). Billy can accept his lack of

control over his life. He is absolved from the search for meaning from bombed cities and boiled bodies. There is no moral, no responsibility for death and its toothless terrors.

Despite the Tralfmadorian escapism, Billy is unable to fully detach himself from traumatic events. The past leaves marks on the present that cannot be erased. When Billy hears a barbershop quartet on his wedding anniversary, he responds viscerally without understanding why:

...he could find no explanation for why the song had affected him so grotesquely. He had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was. (173)

This scene invokes literary trauma theory's claims that traumatic experiences are unspeakable and timeless. In light of these claims, Billy's psychosomatic reaction and his lapse in memory are glitches of a brain incapable of properly processing a traumatic event. The memory is both buried in the past and invasive in the present. For Billy to understand his "great big secret," he is forced to actively search his memories and confront the bombing of Dresden:

Billy thought hard about the effect the quartet had had on him, and then found an association with an experience he had had long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly. (177)

Billy recalls the utter devastation of the bombing, and the image of four guards seared into his memory: "They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet" (178). Instead of time-traveling, here Billy remembers. Time-travel would bring him too close to the traumatic event. Billy reverts to an A-theoretical temporal framework. Remembering, rather than time-traveling, inserts decades of distance between an absolute present and a past event. The language of the narrative itself adds additional distance; past perfect tense "had had" pushes the traumatic event into an earlier past. Time is no longer tenseless, as tense aids in distancing trauma from the traumatized. The barbershop

quartet invokes traumatic memories that cannot be navigated around—they leave a mark, a “remainder” that cannot be neatly assimilated into a temporal landscape.

The novel is also pervaded with marks of Vonnegut the author, the remainders of his own experiences in World War II. As he tells the reader in Chapter 1, Vonnegut, like Billy, survived the bombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war. At various points in the novel, Vonnegut asserts himself as narrator, cameoing as a character in Billy’s narrative with quips such as “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (67). Save for these occasional intrusions, Vonnegut generates layers of abstraction between himself and the traumatic events of the war. As Charles Harris points out in his reading of the novel, “Vonnegut has thus removed himself at least twice from the painful Dresden experience.” Vonnegut the author is first buffered by Vonnegut-as-character and then by Billy, who is additionally distanced from traumatic events by altered temporality and alien abduction (Harris 232). As with Billy, trauma also distorts Vonnegut’s sense of time and self. Marks of trauma suffuse his recollection of a detoured trip to post-war Dresden:

And I became a non-person in the Boston fog, and Lufthansa put me in a limousine with some other non-persons and sent us to a motel for a non-night.

The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric locks, but the wind-up kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again.

There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars. (Vonnegut 20)

By calling himself a “non-person,” Vonnegut demonstrates the dissociation of self that has been observed by trauma studies. The “non-ness” of the flight description blends into the “Boston fog,” challenging the scene’s sense of reality and harkening to “the disbelief that pervades traumatic

experience” (Gusich 505). Significantly, this trip is a return to Dresden, the site of trauma. Vonnegut experiences one of trauma’s temporal effects of simultaneous dilation and contraction (Gusich 513). While time “would not pass,” years shrink into seconds, and the novel revisits his past.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* itself is a remainder of Vonnegut’s trauma that the passage of time cannot erase. He professes that he “gave up remembering” (Vonnegut 15), but his memories from World War II construct and color Billy’s narrative. Vonnegut’s trauma superimposes over Billy’s trauma. Billy and another veteran, Rosewater, use science fiction in attempt to “re-invent themselves and their universe” (101). Vonnegut, too, employs science fiction in his invention of the Tralfamadorians while reframing the perception of time. Regardless of whether Billy’s time travel is real or psychological within the confines of the novel, the temporal distortions are products of Vonnegut’s imagination and personal traumatic experience, better understood by a combination of frameworks from A and B-theory, neuroscience, and literary trauma theory. Like the infinitely repeating song that goes “*My name is Yon Yonson...*,” Vonnegut’s memories from Dresden reverberate through the decades.

### ***Remainder*: reshaping the trauma novel**

In the words of *Remainder*’s unnamed narrator, “Everything must leave some kind of mark” (McCarthy 10). Whereas *Slaughterhouse-Five* unravels a temporal landscape marked by traumatic events, *Remainder* constructs its own space of trauma. The narrator, awakened from a coma after an undisclosed accident, obsessively recreates a part-imagined, part-remembered location. Within this space he experiences a bizarre compulsion: “certain mundane and, on the surface, meaningless moments are repeated and prolonged until they assume an almost sacred aspect” (237). Whereas

temporal distortions in *Slaughterhouse-Five* present most prominently as time travel, the temporal distortions in *Remainder* are cyclically woven into the narrator's compulsion to reenact.

The building in which the narrator recreates resides partway between memory and imagination. While in the bathroom at a house party, he experiences "the event that, the accident aside, was the most significant of [his] whole life" (64). He sees a crack in the bathroom wall. This seemingly trivial detail triggers a cascade of images:

The sense of déjà vu was very strong. I'd been in a space like this before, a place just like this, looking at the crack, a crack that had jutted and meandered in the same way as the one beside the mirror. There'd been the same crack, and a bathtub also, and a window... (65)

The vision sprawls out the window and extends into two pages of details about neighbors, smells, sounds, and particulars down to the bannister finish. Yet, despite the clarity of the vision, the narrator cannot identify the real-world location of the building. Neither can he order the memory in a chronological sequence. Like Billy Pilgrim's plane crash, the narrator's accident may have damaged the memory retrieval centers of his brain, or altered the mechanisms that prevent imagination from conflating with memory. The narrator himself admits his uncertainty over where the vision comes from:

I don't think this was a straight memory. It was more complex. Maybe it was various things all rolled together: memories, imaginings, films, I don't know. But that bit's not important. What's important is that I remembered it, and it was crystal-clear (80).

The questionable reality of the vision merges spatial and temporal distortions. The location and its accompanying actions cannot be located in time, while simultaneously, the vision takes up space within the temporal repository of memory. However, the narrator does not care about these distortions; the authenticity of the vision is "not important." What matters is the "crystal-clear"

experience of remembering. Like a defensive brain's revision of a traumatic event, even if fabricated, the experience of the memory makes it real.

The narrator's reenactment of events within specific spaces triggers distorted experiences of time. Upon a successful reenactment, the narrator says, "The moment I was in seemed to expand and become a pool—a still, clear pool that swallowed everything up in its calm contentedness" (147). Like Billy Pilgrim passively drifting between events, *Remainder*'s narrator passively floats in time. The temporal "moment" becomes a spatial "pool." The cycles of repetitive motion dilate until time slows to a trickle:

Things carried on like that for three days, as I mentioned earlier, although it didn't seem like three days then. It didn't seem like any period. Each time I passed the edges of a new trance time became irrelevant, suspended, each instant widening right out into a huge warm yellow pool I could just lie in, passive, without end. (221)

According to the A-theory of time, the narrator has ceased to follow the flow of time into the future. In light of B-theory, the narrator is stuck at a location on the temporal landscape. Time "became irrelevant." Trauma suspends the narrator in time and prevents him from moving on with his life. The reenactments lead him in small circles on the temporal landscape, but do not bring him far from the traumatic accident. The novel offers its own neuropsychological explanation for the narrator's compulsion to reenact. According to a doctor who inspects the narrator, "the body administers its own painkillers...the stronger the trauma, the stronger the dose, and hence the stronger the compulsion to trigger new releases" (220). The novel suggests that the narrator returns to reminders of his trauma due to a literal addiction. The reenactments trigger drug-induced trances that numb the pain of trauma, while paradoxically bringing him back to the painful accident.



Hints of the narrator's accident pervade his first-person account, despite the unspeakability of his trauma. "About the accident itself I can say very little," says the narrator in the first line of the novel (3). The reason is twofold: he claims to have forgotten the event, and he is legally silenced by a multimillion-pound settlement. His amnesia harkens to assertions in literary trauma theory that the traumatic experience is "unspeakable," likened to a "fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain" (Balaev 151). Trauma theory suggests that he undergoes not only memory loss from physical damage of neurological networks, but also memory repression from subconscious failure to assimilate the event. In line with trauma theory, overcoming the trauma is dependent "on the ability to retrieve and process painful memories" (Di-Capua 4). The narrator of *Remainder*, however, is restricted from doing so. He is denied access to working through his trauma for healing. Even if physical therapy restores his memory retrieval, he is gagged by the settlement and remains traumatized. He cannot tell the reader about the traumatic event, only that "it involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits" (McCarthy 3). Like the bits falling onto the narrator, bits and pieces of clues fall through the narrative constraints of the novel. The remainders of memory from the traumatic event still interrupt the narrator's present, even when he is twofold prevented from sharing the full narrative of his trauma. While dreaming of his hired reenactment staff, the dream deteriorates into a plane crash nightmare:

Everything was running smoothly, happily, until I noticed, lying beside the goalposts, these old, greasy escalator parts...And then our plane—the plane that we'd formed from the interlinking of our bodies: it was stalling, nose-diving towards the ground, whose surface area was crumpling like old tin... (154)

The nightmare strongly invokes the narrator's traumatic event. The escalator parts harken back to the "parts, bits" of technology involved in the incident, as well as the narrator's own broken body

lying on the ground. The falling plane fills the unspecified gap of “something” falling from the sky. Falling recurs through falling cats, used in the reenactments “at a loss rate of three every two days” (156). McCarthy inextricably ties the narrative back to the narrator’s trauma. The smell of cordite—a propellant used for weaponry, likely in the falling “technology” from the accident—permeates the novel. The narrator notices cordite on at least three distinct occasions (35, 132, 238); yet, when asked about cordite he responds, “Cordite?...I don’t think I’ve ever been near cordite” (280). Sensory information from the traumatic event diffuses into the narrator’s post-traumatic experience. He remembers, but he is not allowed to remember. The traumatic event, despite its hints, remains unspeakable.

The unspeakable trauma renders the narrator “unreal.” In accordance with literary trauma theory, a traumatic experience “divides or destroys identity” (Balaev 149). Memories construct a sense of self. Trauma, both physical and psychological, renders memories unreliable, and the narrator expresses his awareness of the unreliability on the first page of the novel: “But who’s to say these are genuine memories? Who’s to say my traumatized mind didn’t just make them up” (McCarthy 3). The narrator’s self-awareness points to a perception of loss and a pervasive sense of inauthenticity. His compulsion to reenact is coupled with a desire to feel real, and he temporarily feels real through reenactments:

They’d been real; I’d been real—been without first understanding how to try to be: cut out the detour. I remembered this will all the force of an epiphany, a revelation...I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so that I could feel real again. I wanted to; I had to; I would. Nothing else mattered. (67)

Through creating a space of repetition, the narrator attempts to regain a pre-traumatic sense of self. The constant repetition of detailed, mundane motions within the space develops a cyclical

temporality. The narrator envelops himself in it: “I just felt like doing it again and again and again. Hundreds of times. More. No one counted” (162). As the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* would say, he is “trapped in the amber of the moment.” He spends his present within temporal cycles, attempting to return to an earlier past where he was “real.” Yet, despite the narrator’s attempt to remain in these cycles, he cannot avoid what lies outside. Imperfect cycles reoccur in the novel. The reenactments, increasing in extremity, culminate at the end of the novel in a plane hijacking. As he orders the plane to turn back and forth, the narrator envisions, “Our trail would be visible from the ground: an eight, plus that first bit where we’d first set off—fainter, drifted to the side by now, discarded, residual, a remainder” (306). Like the “fainter,” “discarded” tail of the figure-eight, the traumatic accident remains in his memory. To borrow Tralfamadorian imagery, navigating to the spatiotemporal bubbles means traversing the surrounding temporal landscape, and thus encountering reminders of the traumatic event.

With its cycles of division and remainders, *Remainder* reveals a fixation on setting to zero. Imperfect eights—or rotated infinities—bookend the novel, with the figure-eight contrail at the end (306) and the eight-and-a-half million settlement at the start (8). The remainder after the eight upsets the narrator: “The eight was perfect, neat: a curved figure infinitely turning back into itself. But then the half. Why had they added the half? It seemed to me so messy” (8). In other places the narrator lingers on setting to zero, from “clocking the counter” on a coffeeshop loyalty punch card (52), to his stock portfolio growing back up “to the level it had been” (121). In order to set to zero, one must remove the remainder, chisel it away. The narrator associates this reset with the process of sculpture: “to strip all the other stuff away, get rid of it. The surplus matter” (91). To remove the remainder, the narrator becomes obsessed with stripping away “surplus matter.” Matter is an obstacle, an enemy. The scene in a car-repair shop encapsulates his animosity against matter. The novel illustrates his

elation when the window washer fluid seemingly disappears, and his crashing disappointment when the fluid leaks back:

A miracle seemed to have taken place...in contravention of the very laws of physics, laws that make...large, unsuspected objects fall out of the sky. This miracle, this trump over matter, seemed to have occurred, then turned out not to have done at all—to have failed utterly, spectacularly, its watery debris crashing down to earth, turning the scene of triumphant launch into the scene of a disaster, a catastrophe (174).

Twice in the passage, the narrator harkens back to his traumatic accident. He links surplus matter to the remnants of his trauma. To “triumph over matter” is to upset the laws of physics, including the gravity that had sent objects hurtling towards his head. “Setting to zero” viewed in light of this passage means resetting to a time before the trauma, clearing away the debris of traumatic distortions within memory. In his reading of the novel, Wojciech Drag interprets the car shop scene and its subsequent reenactments as “the narrator’s attempt to undo his traumatic accident” (Drag 382). The scene’s cyclical reenactment demonstrates the narrator’s attempt to “zero out” his post-traumatic experiences, to return to a point where he “could feel real.” Alternatively, the traumatic event itself can also be seen as the zero point. The obsession with clearing away excess matter parallels the attempt to dig through the brain’s fabrications and get at the root of trauma. The traumatic event is like the buried sculpture, to be chiseled out from a mass of distorted memories. In the language of trauma theory, setting to zero is “working through” the trauma, confronting the traumatic experience for healing. However, the narrator can neither reset to a time before the accident, nor fully work through the “matter” surrounding the event; the trauma remains.

In contrast with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which narrates Vonnegut’s authentic wartime experiences through the character of Billy Pilgrim, *Remainder* presents a trauma novel that detaches

itself from subjectivity. The subject remains anonymous. Although the narrator inserts his opinion through statements such as “it was a very happy day” (McCarthy 282), the narrative fails to stir up readerly empathy—in this example, the “happy day” consists of a murderous bank heist reenactment; rather than share in the narrator’s satisfaction, the reader is more inclined to exclaim, like one of the reenactors, “Oh my God!” (292). The critic Pieter Vermeulen calls the novel “an attempt to debunk the customary pieties of trauma fiction” that “challenges this tradition’s reliance on psychological realism and feeling” (Vermeulen 550). The novel dissociates from the psychology of a subject. As Vermeulen explains,

McCarthy’s project ends up replacing the strong mode of empathic emotion and subjectivity that we tend to associate with the traditional novel with what can be analyzed as an intractable, dysphoric, subjectless affect...*Remainder* does not pause to assess the psychological damage the accident inflicts on its nameless narrator, nor does it qualify its representation of the traumatized mind by registering its awareness of the ethical stakes involved in the rendering of injury and pain. (550-551).

Unlike *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the novel does little to generate and address the emotions that accompany trauma. *Slaughterhouse-Five* soothes the sting of death with a transformed temporal framework; *Remainder* locks the narrator, reenactors, and reader into absurd cycles of repetition. Yet for all its detachment from subjectivity, *Remainder* still implicates side characters as the subjects of trauma—especially Naz Vyas. The novel introduces Naz as a “confident, efficient” partner of Time Control UK, a logistics company (McCarthy 83). Naz helps the narrator organize and carry out the reenactments, gradually taking on more complex and extreme demands with severe psychological tolls. Dragged aboard the narrator’s hijacked plane, Naz is last seen in a vegetative state—in the narrator’s words, “locked up and vacant” and “pretty useless” (301, 302). Through his

compulsion to reenact, the narrator reenacts the experience of trauma onto another. The traumatized becomes the traumatizer, perpetuating a cycle of trauma.

***Beloved*: response to subjectivity**

Behind the post-traumatic compulsions of its narrator, *Remainder* raises a question: how does the privilege of a subject influence the dissociation of subjectivity from trauma? Naz, a “young Asian guy” (85) of likely Desi heritage, is broken and traumatized in the novel’s setting of Britain, a former colonizer. The narrator’s own race is left unspoken for assumption, and besides Naz the only noted non-white characters are “Africans”—a homogenous body to receive Western humanitarianism (38). While the novel does not demonstrate “awareness of the ethical stakes” involved in rendering trauma, it suggests that a subject’s position affords the privilege to distinguish between “emphatic emotion” and “subjectless affect.” This paper’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* responds to *Remainder*’s challenge of the trauma novel: there *are* ethical stakes in rendering trauma, there *are* subjects that cannot be silenced, and there *is* genuine feeling.

Set several years after the Civil War, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a former slave haunted by the horrors of slavery and the daughter she killed to protect from it. The trauma of her past profoundly affects how Sethe interacts with her memories. Certain memories reappear throughout the novel outside of her conscious control. When reminded of her lynched mother, Sethe is suddenly overwhelmed by memories of her childhood:

She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something he had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross [on her body]. (Morrison 61)

Previously forgotten, the memories “seep” into her active mind like water from a breached dam, about to flood. Despite Sethe’s unwillingness to remember, the scene of her mother’s corpse becomes “clear and clearer” (62). She sees the circled cross, a Klan hate symbol, “burnt right in the skin” (61). Like the burn mark, the memories leave an imprint in her mind. The reunion with another former slave, Paul D, fills in missing details surrounding a traumatic event before her escape:

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?...I can’t go back and add more [details]...But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I’d love more—so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping. (70).

Sethe’s conscious mind and her “rebellious brain” diverge. As the passage shifts to first person and present tense, the narrative slips into a stream of consciousness. Within Sethe’s psyche, her post-slavery self grapples with the horrid fascination in fleshing out that “hateful picture” from the past. The picture entails pain for the viewer, but Sethe’s brain says, “I’d love more.” The self-sabotaging behavior exhibits what Jacques Derrida calls “autoimmunity.” As J. Hillis Miller expounds, a community with autoimmunity is “inhabited by an irresistible tendency to turn its self-protective mechanisms against itself, to sacrifice itself in an attempt to protect itself against itself” (Miller 34). The paradoxical logic of autoimmunity is fractal; at Sethe’s individual level, her brain turns against herself. Sethe suppresses her memories to protect herself from the pain of the past, thereby preventing herself from working through the trauma. Her brain retaliates and forcibly occupies her mind with only the traumatic past: “loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (Morrison 70). The traumatic past expands and leaves “no room” for the future. Like the visions sprawling around the crack in *Remainder*’s reenactment space,

the image in Sethe's memory expands upon itself with "no stopping"—except, in *Beloved*, the details are brutal and real. Past memories superimpose onto the space of the present.

Time and space in *Beloved* are inextricably woven. Whereas time is spatialized in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and spatially cyclical in *Remainder*, space is temporalized in *Beloved*. Spaces are imbued with memories. Time is attached to pictures of places. Sethe articulates this spatiotemporal framework:

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away (36).

Sethe's explanation provides much to unpack. Notably, Sethe uses the term "rememory" instead of "memory." "Rememory" harkens to the "reenactment" in *Remainder*—both concepts engage with a character's trauma via navigation through space. Sethe's spatiotemporal framework and the idea of "rememory" are chained to her trauma. Rememory inserts additional distance between herself and traumatic events. "Re"-memory may mean "reexperienced"-memory: buried memories, like those of Sethe's childhood, are retrieved into a mental buffer of events that need to be re-memorized and worked through in order to be accessible to Sethe's conscious mind. "Re"-memory may also mean "repressed"-memory, as in the "old rememories that broke her heart" (95) stirred up by Paul D when he reappears from her past. Like the divergence between Sethe's conscious mind and her "rebellious brain" in her stream of consciousness, Sethe's mind compartmentalizes and distinguishes between



memory and rememory. In either case, like Vonnegut using layers of narrative abstraction to distance himself from the bombing of Dresden, rememory distances Sethe from the trauma of slavery and the murder of her baby. Yet, no matter the distance, the traumatic events are real. The plantation where Sethe was enslaved remains real in rememory.

According to Sethe, places leave remainders that “are still there,” reminiscent of the marks in *Remainder* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Like the “revolting clump of scars” marking Sethe’s back with a “tree” (21), places such as 124 also make marks. Places can mark a spatial landscape as physical locations, but places are also preserved as pictures with inherently temporal qualities. The act of taking a picture is an act of capturing time. The picture encapsulates the moment in which the picture was taken. A picture can be physically brought through space and time, but it forever links to the time captured within it. A pictured place and its encapsulated experiences can therefore be reexperienced throughout time. *Beloved* goes further, to say that physical space is also landmarked with temporal features. Pictures exist “out there, in the world,” and “down the road.” Harkening to Billy Pilgrim’s B-theoretical experience of spatialized time, *Beloved* presents temporalized space: whereas navigating through time brings Billy Pilgrim to different locations in space, Sethe says that navigating through space brings her to different moments in time. Space stores a map of memories, especially those of the plantation. In Sethe’s words, “it’s never going away.”

Slavery remains to haunt the novel. To protect her children from slave-catchers, Sethe kills her baby, only known as Beloved. The ghost of the baby inhabits Sethe’s house at 124 Bluestone Road, described in the novel’s opening words: “124 was spiteful” (3). Like the psychological disruptions of trauma, reminders of the past invade Sethe’s daily life through the ghost’s activities. The house is isolated from the rest of the community. At first, the “town full of disgust” (5) seems pointed towards the building’s supernatural activity; as the past unravels, the community’s rejection

of 124 is seen in light of Sethe's act of infanticide. Slavery drives Sethe to kill her child, the ghost of whom haunts her home. Enclosed within the space of 124, Sethe's trauma of killing her child, her "best thing" (272), reasserts itself in a continuous present. The house becomes a temporal island, excised from the sequential flow of past, present, and future. Even in the address "124," the numerical sequence is disrupted. Andrew Ng points to significance of the missing "3":

Number three is noteworthy because, like *Beloved*, Sethe's third child, its absence is what announces its presence all the more. The number three is represented by virtue of its invisibility, in the way *Beloved* lingers as an unseen, unspoken presence that saturates the house... Three, in this sense, reflects the ambiguity that *Beloved* embodies—an empty space that nevertheless resounds as an inevitable trace. (Ng 233)

The missing "3" points to trauma theory's unspeakability of trauma. Sethe's slaughter of her third child is left unspoken for most of the novel, but it pervades the novel's pages as well as its title. According to Ng, the empty space in 124 paradoxically leaves a "trace"—or mark. Indeed, Sethe's missing daughter embodies the house, marking the spatial landscape with a recurring reminder of the past. Sethe's remaining daughter Denver—named after a place—is the only other occupant in the house. Denver realizes that 124 is an animate being: "a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits... someone dependent but proud" (Morrison 29). The space contains the memories and accompanying emotions of a person. When *Beloved* manifests physically at 124 as a young woman, she asserts, "This is the place I am" (123). She takes on the space; she is the place. Saturating the house and lingering in the present, *Beloved* brings with herself the temporal distortions complicated by trauma.

*Beloved* suspends Sethe in time and in her trauma. In both ghost and bodily forms, *Beloved*'s very existence distorts time. She is someone brought from the past into the present. As a baby ghost

with “tiny hand prints” (3), Beloved stays frozen at the time of her death, defying temporal passage. When physically manifested, Beloved appears as a young woman, as if she had experienced eighteen years in an alternate timeline where Sethe did not kill her. She crosses from death into the world of the living. Unlike Billy Pilgrim’s passive sweep between “the full arc of his life,” Beloved’s temporal reversal suggests an intervention on the past. When Sethe finally recognizes Beloved’s physical form as her daughter, she thinks that the past has been undone—that now, “there would be time” (176). Beloved casts an illusion that Sethe can live in a changed timeline where the infanticide never happened. But as Billy Pilgrim knows, traumatic events cannot be undone; the Tralfamadorian words echo, “All time is all time. It does not change.” Sethe erroneously thinks that she no longer needs to work through the trauma of Beloved’s death, “excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember” (183). Sethe’s eagerness to forget emphasizes the pain of her memories. She uses Beloved as an outlet of escapism from the past. Whereas Billy Pilgrim gets “unstuck” in time, Sethe does the opposite, getting stuck and “wrapped in a timeless present” (185). Like the painkiller-induced pools in which the narrator of *Remainder* floats, the “timeless present” envelops Sethe and numbs the pain of trauma. Without a sense of time, the terrible events of the past detach from the present into a realm as ambiguous as the “other side.” In an A-theoretical temporal framework, Sethe no longer moves towards the future. In a B-theoretical framework, Sethe remains stagnant at a single point on the temporal landscape. Her life ceases to move in time; instead, “Beloved ate up her life, took it” (250). Beloved has no future and consumes Sethe’s as well. Sethe fails to work through her trauma, remaining traumatized.

It is the ex-slave community’s exorcism of Beloved that opens the possibility for Sethe and Denver to navigate into the future. The community’s women disrupt the tie between time and space at 124. Rather than seeing an isolated repository of Sethe’s memories at 124, they see themselves:

“Younger, stronger, even as little girls” (258). The place of 124 recovers meaning beyond Sethe’s trauma. The space is no longer insulated from the outside world, and Beloved can no longer personify it. These women each experienced the brutality of slavery, but they find collective healing in community. From the perspective of Ella, another ex-slave, “The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you stomp it out” (256). Indeed, the group of women “stomp out” Beloved’s embodiment from the past. The tides of time wash over the former temporal island at 124. Beloved fades from the memory of those who saw her, but she has already made a lasting mark on *Beloved* and those who read of her.

### **Conclusion: our collective temporal landscape**

“This is not a story to pass on,” concludes Morrison in *Beloved* (275). Does she warn against the perpetuation of historical traumas, passed on into the future? Or does she assert that the traumas of history should not be overlooked and forgotten? The language of the novel leaves room for both, pointing to the marks of the past as well as our collective responsibility for their healing. Just as Vonnegut recognizes the “glacial” difficulties of writing an “anti-war book” (Vonnegut 3) in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, so Morrison confronts the heavy task of reparations through *Beloved*, dedicated to slavery’s “Sixty Million and more.” Dean Franco writes in his reading of the novel and its criticisms,

*Beloved* has been called a slave-narrative, a re-memory, and a “counter-history,” reenvisioning our past. But it is also our present. The novel we read is the text that reads us, as the saying goes. To the extent that we make reparation a consequence of reading, the book is either our traumatic past, or we are its reconciling future. (Franco 432)

The reconciling future is in our collective hands. Of the three novels examined in this paper, all three depict the trauma of an individual. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Beloved* also piece the individual's trauma into a wider collective story; it is only *Remainder's* narrator who neglects the shared experiences of trauma. The narrator has the financial means and social privilege to impact others—one of the novel's few characters even suggests that he use his wealth "to help people" (McCarthy 33). Instead, *Remainder's* hyper-individualized subject—despite the novel's efforts to eradicate subjectivity—leverages his position to insulate himself, choosing instead to float in passive, painkiller-induced temporal pools. He treats human beings as objects rather than subjects, ultimately reenacting his trauma upon them. A distorted view of fellow people accompanies his distorted sense of time.

In spite of all the nonlinear temporal frameworks presented in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Remainder*, and *Beloved*, as readers the bulk of our lives are experienced in A-theory's linear flow of time. We are three-dimensional beings constrained to the passage of past, present, and future. The future is unknown to us—the temporal landscape uncharted, its boundaries open for definition. We can choose to, like Billy Pilgrim, passively accept the events in our lives and our surrounding world. We have the capacity to, like *Remainder's* narrator, perpetuate the cycles and structures of trauma. Or, like the women in *Beloved*, we can cast out the lingering phantoms of past injustice and work towards communal, societal healing. Unforgotten, the remainders of trauma remind us to prevent its repetition as we shape our collective, ever-expanding temporal landscape.

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