

Thing Narrative: A Reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved from the Perspective of New Materialism

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Keywords: *Beloved*; Toni Morrison; New Materialism; Thing Narrative; Racial Trauma; Cultural Identity Reconstruction

Abstract: Different from the dominant anthropocentric research paradigm of existing studies on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which marginalize natural imagery as mere rhetorical ornamentation, this paper adopts a new materialist framework centering on material agency, intra-action, and material hybridity to reinterpret the novel's diverse botanical narratives. Through close textual reading, this study explores how key plant images, including sycamores, chamomile, boxwood thickets, woodland clearings, and wild roses, function as independent non-human narrative subjects rather than passive scenic backdrops. It demonstrates that botanical matter first serves as enduring material archives that preserve the obscured racial violence and gendered bodily trauma of chattel slavery beyond fallible human memory; second, realizes individual psychological healing for Denver and communal spiritual liberation for marginalized Black communities through equal, voluntary two-way intra-action between humans and plants; and finally, subverts colonial binary opposition via the unique life-death hybrid thingness of wild roses, reconnecting African Americans with fractured West African spiritual traditions and reconstructing their disrupted cultural identity. This paper reveals Morrison's profound ecological ethics of interspecies equality and symbiosis, offering a fresh non-anthropocentric theoretical perspective to enrich academic interpretations of the novel's racial trauma and spiritual redemption themes.

1. Introduction

Published in 1987, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* draws on a real enslaved mother's tragic story to confront the hidden violence and lasting psychological damage of American chattel slavery. Unlike conventional slave narratives that prioritize human historical memory and individual testimony, Morrison embeds abundant botanical imagery throughout the novel, endowing sycamores, chamomile, boxwood thickets, woodland clearings and wild roses with independent narrative significance. These vegetative beings do not merely serve as decorative backdrops; they actively witness racial violence, carry collective Black trauma, and participate in the spiritual redemption of marginalized Black communities, forming a unique botanical narrative system.

Most existing studies of *Beloved* focus on trauma theory, feminist criticism and thematic analysis

of racial suffering, while treating natural elements as auxiliary rhetorical tools under a typical anthropocentric framework. Such research overlooks the autonomous vitality and material agency of non-human matter, resulting in the insufficient exploration of Morrison's ecological and material ethics. To fill this academic gap, this paper applies new materialist theories, including material agency, intra-action and thing hybridity, to reinterpret the novel's botanical narratives. Through close textual reading, it explores how plant matter functions as historical archives, therapeutic spaces and cultural carriers, and further reveals how Morrison subverts colonial dualism and reconstructs African American cultural identity. This study aims to offer a non-anthropocentric theoretical perspective and enrich the multi-dimensional research on Toni Morrison's works.

2. Botanical Agency as Material Archives of Racial Atrocities

2.1. Material Memory: Plant Narrative beyond Human Amnesia Mechanism

The human psyche possesses an instinctive self-protective mechanism that represses and erases extreme traumatic memories to achieve spiritual relief. In contrast, natural matter is free from psychological amnesia and permanently retains the material traces of historical violence, awakening racial trauma deliberately concealed and eliminated by human society through unique botanical agency [2]. In *Beloved*, sycamore trees, chamomile, and wild weeds function as independent non-human witnesses, documenting public lynching violence and systematic gender exploitation against Black women under slavery and forming enduring material archives of racial atrocities that resist white historical revisionism [4].

The opening scene in which Sethe carefully applies chamomile ointment to cover her lifelong hideous scars unveils her repressed and unforgettable traumatic memories of Sweet Home Plantation, a brutal cage that imprisoned her youth, freedom, and human dignity. The dense sycamore forests on the plantation margins are no ordinary scenic landscapes but blood-stained execution sites for racial lynching, where countless innocent young Black boys were arbitrarily slaughtered and hanged by white slave owners. Morrison deliberately constructs a unique memory dislocation in Sethe's traumatic cognition: when recalling the most horrifying atrocities at Sweet Home, what emerges first is not the bloody scenes of Black victims but the rustling sound of sycamore leaves in the wind. This cognitive phenomenon powerfully proves the irreplaceable narrative power of botanical objects in carrying racial trauma. Nevertheless, traditional anthropocentric literary criticism merely interprets sycamores as a rhetorical contrast between natural beauty and human cruelty, defining them as passive symbolic attachments to human emotions and plots while ignoring their inherent material agency, autonomous vitality, and independent memory-bearing capacity beyond human subjectivity.

From a new materialist perspective, sycamores are not decorative accessories to human narratives but independent material subjects with autonomous vitality and collective memory [2]. Regenerating year after year, tree branches and leaves permanently preserve the blood, fear, and despair of lynched Black victims, engraving racial violence into their biological structures. White slave owners beautified sycamore landscapes to gloss over plantation atrocities and whitewash colonial history. However, the material agency of sycamores constantly resists historical erasure. The seasonal fluctuations of branches and leaves continuously intrude into human cognition, forcing Sethe to confront repressed memories of racial massacre. Compared with fallible and modifiable human memory, sycamores retain the authentic traces of slavery violence in eternal material form, constituting solid non-human archives of Black racial suffering [4].

2.2. Dual Trauma Documentation: Botanical Witness of Collective Violence and Female Bodily Enslavement

Beyond the collective racial trauma recorded by sycamores, chamomile and wild weeds bear the unique physical and spiritual trauma of Black women, faithfully witnessing systematic gender oppression under the plantation system. Escaping the inhumane torment of Sweet Home in extreme despair, Sethe traverses barren fields overgrown with wild weeds. The sharp thorns repeatedly pierce her skin, replicating the physical pain and personal humiliation of sexual violence imposed by white overseers and awakening her deeply repressed trauma of sexual enslavement. After retreating to the haunted and desolate House 124, Sethe regularly picks wild chamomile to make soothing ointments, attempting to relieve the lifelong physical scars left by slave abuse. As the cool and viscous chamomile juice repairs her damaged skin, the rigid binary boundary between humans and matter dissolves. These humble wild plants become intimate and enduring carriers of the unspeakable traumatic memories of enslaved Black women.

Chamomile and wild weeds possess dual material agency, undertaking dual narrative functions of physical healing and memory activation. Physiologically, chamomile alleviates skin inflammation, burning pain, and chronic physical ailments, providing vital bodily comfort for enslaved people deprived of formal medical treatment. Narratively, its unique fragrance, rough texture, and invasive growth pattern break through human subjective control and psychological repression, continuously awakening deep humiliating memories of sexual enslavement, physical abuse, and racial bullying. The unrestrained proliferation of wild weeds that encroaches on plantation land metaphorically reflects the unscrupulous violence and sexual predation of white slave owners and overseers, intuitively demonstrating the arbitrary occupation, brutal violation, and thorough objectification of Black female bodies under slavery.

In summary, the unique material agency of botanical objects fundamentally subverts human psychological amnesia. Confronted with extreme trauma, individuals and even entire races actively evade painful memories and beautify violent history for self-protection. Natural matter, by contrast, is free from subjective prejudice and psychological avoidance, authentically and permanently retaining traces of slavery atrocities deliberately concealed by mainstream white discourse. Sycamores, chamomile, and wild weeds jointly construct a comprehensive non-human trauma narrative system, recording the obscured bloody violence of racial oppression from a material perspective and transforming silent nature into eternal racial memory archives, which form a sharp textual contrast with the subsequent therapeutic plant narratives.

3. Intra-action: Plant Therapeutic Spaces of Voluntary Trauma Redemption

3.1. Individual Therapeutic Field: Boxwood Thickets and Denver's Trauma Breakthrough

New materialist intra-action theory advocates that humans and non-human matter maintain an interdependent and mutually shaping symbiotic relationship rather than a one-way dominant hierarchy[1]. Different from unilateral material force, intra-action represents a two-way co-creation process where human emotions and botanical vitality mutually generate unique spiritual values. In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs two core botanical therapeutic spaces: the boxwood thicket beside House 124 and Baby Suggs' woodland clearing. Through voluntary and equal intra-action with plants, traumatized Black people achieve individual spiritual awakening and communal collective redemption.

Trapped in the haunted and desolate House 124 since childhood, Denver suffers from severe intergenerational slavery trauma and extreme social isolation, alienated by both white society and local Black communities. Sethe's brutal enslavement experience and desperate infanticide leave indelible psychological shadows on Denver. Coupled with pervasive racial discrimination, malicious public

opinion, and prejudiced gazes from the external world, Denver falls into long-term self-isolation, complete social withdrawal, and spiritual numbness. The dense circular boxwood thicket growing beside the house becomes her exclusive tranquil spiritual sanctuary and the only emotional sustenance in her lonely life. The evergreen intertwined branches form an enclosed space that isolates external hostility, noise, and racial injustice. The soft rustling of leaves in the breeze continuously soothes her inner loneliness, fear, and accumulated anxiety. Traditional literary interpretations merely regard boxwood thickets as tender shelters for vulnerable Black women, ignoring the core intra-active essence of mutual nourishment and co-achievement between humans and plants within this natural space.

From a new materialist perspective, no fixed subject-object hierarchy exists between Denver and the boxwood thicket; the two shape and accomplish each other (Barad, 2007). Denver actively seeks comfort in the thicket day after day, and her constant presence, body temperature, and breath nourish the plants, promoting luxuriant growth. In return, the enclosed botanical space provides her with sustained security and belonging, relieving social fear and traumatic loneliness. The therapeutic value of this interactive relationship is not inherent but generated through long-term voluntary intra-action. Subsequent falling sycamore blossoms initiate gentle material interaction with Denver, gradually awakening her courage to break self-seclusion and seek communal support, ultimately facilitating her individual spiritual breakthrough and self-redemption.

3.2. Communal Redemption Space: Woodland Clearing and Spiritual Liberation of Black Communities

While the confined boxwood thicket realizes individual spiritual comfort and trauma healing for the isolated Denver, the open woodland clearing guarded by Baby Suggs completes grand collective spiritual baptism and trauma relief for all traumatized, displaced, and marginalized Black people in nineteenth-century Cincinnati. After escaping the physical exploitation, mental torture, and hierarchical oppression of Sweet Home through persistent resistance, Baby Suggs devotes her remaining life to comforting and guiding traumatized Black survivors. She regularly gathers displaced, suffering, and helpless Black neighbors in the lush and secluded woodland clearing. Under the shelter of thriving vegetation, the oppressed Black community thoroughly breaks the secular shackles and invisible racial constraints imposed by slavery. They weep freely to release accumulated grief, dance unrestrainedly to pursue spiritual freedom, and vent the pain, despair, and grievance accumulated during decades of enslavement, achieving thorough spiritual liberation and emotional relief after prolonged suffering.

Superficial traditional studies simply define the woodland clearing as a single cultural symbol of African ancestral tree worship and spiritual ritual space, overemphasizing abstract cultural connotations while neglecting the core origin of its healing power: equal and symbiotic intra-action between humans and matter [10]. The redemptive power of the woodland clearing stems not from singular cultural metaphors or religious rituals but from the long-term two-way symbiotic and mutually nourishing spiritual bond between traumatized Black communities and natural vegetation [9]. Lush forests and vibrant plants continuously absorb the grief, anger, and depression accumulated within Black groups, effectively alleviating long-term collective spiritual repression and psychological suffering. Meanwhile, the sincere emotional catharsis, collective empathy, and spiritual release of Black people endow cold and silent natural landscapes with warm humanistic temperature and profound spiritual significance. In this pure natural field completely separated from slavery rules, the anthropocentric hierarchy and white supremacy constructed by slave ideology completely collapse. Plants are no longer passive decorative backdrops for human activities but equal symbiotic spiritual partners who coexist and redeem traumatized Black people.

Different from the unilateral, compulsory, and traumatic botanical agency elaborated in Chapter One, human-plant intra-action represents an active, voluntary, and self-chosen redemptive path for traumatized

Black groups. This two-way interactive model subverts the subordinate status of natural matter and the passive suffering state of humans, forming a positive thematic contrast with the previous trauma narrative. By actively embracing natural vegetation and coexisting equally with all beings, Black communities gradually eliminate intergenerational trauma left by slavery, achieving comprehensive spiritual transformation from individual awakening to communal redemption and breaking the spiritual shackles of racial oppression. This active botanical healing narrative fully embodies Morrison's profound humanistic care for Black people and lays a solid narrative and theoretical foundation for the reconstruction of fractured Black cultural identity through plant hybridity in the subsequent chapter.

4. Thingness and Botanical Hybridity: The Reconstruction of African American Cultural Identity

4.1. Life-Decay Hybridity: The Non-Binary Material Thingness of Wild Roses

The brutal transatlantic slave trade and institutionalized American chattel slavery not only inflicted irreversible physical damage, lifelong psychological shadows, and persistent intergenerational spiritual trauma on African Americans but also brutally severed the cultural connections, ancestral spiritual inheritance, and ethnic memory bonds between displaced Black people and their West African homelands. This irreversible cultural rupture traps African American communities in the predicament of fractured cultural identity, rootlessness, and spiritual drift within white-dominated mainstream society. In the later stage of the novel's narration, wild roses growing prosperously along the abandoned lumberyard fence serve as the core representative imagery of botanical thingness and hybridity. Their unique autonomous materiality and coexistence of vitality and decay break the rigid binary opposition system constructed by white supremacy and colonial discourse, repair the fractured cultural context of Black communities, and reconstruct the complete, independent, and stable spiritual and cultural identity of marginalized African Americans.

Every August, wild roses bloom vigorously along the fence. Even when petals wither and the plants enter decay, their fragrance becomes richer and more mellow rather than fading. The coexistence of decaying form and lingering vigorous fragrance constitutes the unique hybridity of wild roses. Traditional anthropocentric interpretations merely regard withering wild roses as a metaphor for Black resilience in suffering, reducing botanical thingness to an accessory symbol of human spirit and ignoring the independent and self-consistent material narrative value of wild roses [3].

According to Bill Brown's new materialist thingness theory, the narrative value of wild roses is completely independent of human aesthetic projection and emotional endowment, possessing pure and autonomous material ontological significance [3]. After full blooming, roses enter the natural withering cycle, shedding artificial ornamental functions and external cultural attachments to present authentic material thingness. The lasting rich fragrance in the air intuitively embodies the autonomous internal vitality of plants, proving that natural matter can retain vigorous spiritual energy even in physical decline and traumatic decay [8]. This unique material state subverts the mainstream white stereotype that trauma equals complete destruction and extinction, verifying that suffering and regeneration, decline and spiritual rebirth can coexist harmoniously within a single independent material carrier.

This unique hybrid trait of coexisting physical decline and internal vitality thoroughly dissolves the absolute binary opposition constructed by plantation capitalism and white colonial hegemony [6]. To rationalize brutal racial exploitation, legalize natural plunder, and consolidate white hierarchical dominance, colonial ideology artificially sets insurmountable boundaries between humans and nature, life and death, nobility and humility, constructing a rigid hierarchical order of human domination over nature and white rule over Black ethnic groups. Wild roses blur these artificial absolute boundaries, break the simplistic binary cognitive model, and overthrow colonial dualistic thinking and oppressive hierarchical logic through inclusive and diverse hybrid materiality.

4.2. Cultural Return: Botanical Hybridity and the Remolding of Black Spiritual Identity

The life-death hybridity of wild roses is highly consistent with the traditional West African natural cosmology and indigenous spiritual beliefs inherited by African Americans [10]. African indigenous culture regards prosperous vegetation and natural landscapes as sacred media connecting mortals and ancestral souls, carrying the core ethnic spirit and cultural memory of Black communities. This ancient and inclusive natural belief was transplanted to American lands alongside the transatlantic slave trade, becoming a hidden spiritual sustenance and cultural anchor for displaced and homeless African Americans. The life-death hybridity of wild roses perfectly replicates the core connotation of African natural spirituality, building a stable spiritual bridge between traumatized contemporary Black people and their fractured ancestral cultural traditions. When displaced Black survivors gather beside blooming and withering rose bushes for emotional communication and spiritual sustenance, they retrieve fragmented ancestral cultural memory and regain long-lost ethnic spiritual belonging through continuous positive intra-action between humans and roses [5].

The unique thingness and hybridity of wild roses complete the ultimate ideological sublimation and narrative closure of Morrison's botanical thing narrative system [7]. Throughout the novel, diverse botanical imagery undertakes progressive and complementary narrative functions. Sycamores, wild weeds, and chamomile record hidden racial trauma through unilateral botanical material agency; boxwood thickets and woodland clearings realize individual and communal trauma healing through equal two-way human-plant intra-action; wild roses reconstruct fractured Black cultural identity through non-binary hybrid materiality. Morrison's systematic botanical writing deeply integrates natural material narration with Black survival predicaments and spiritual redemption, constructing a complete, rigorous, and logically self-consistent botanical thing narrative system.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the botanical narrative logic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* on the basis of new materialist theories of material agency, intra-action, and material hybridity. Moving beyond conventional anthropocentric interpretations that trivialize natural imagery as decorative rhetoric, this study validates the autonomous narrative value of vegetal matter in representing Black racial experiences. Plant imagery such as sycamores, chamomile and wild weeds operates as enduring non-human material archives, preserving the suppressed racial violence and gendered trauma of chattel slavery that human memory tends to distort or erase. Through equal and voluntary human-plant intra-action, boxwood thickets and woodland clearings construct therapeutic spaces that alleviate individual trauma and facilitate communal spiritual liberation for marginalized Black survivors. Furthermore, the unique life-death hybridity of wild roses dismantles colonial binary thinking, revives fractured West African spiritual traditions, and reconstructs the disrupted cultural identity of African American communities. By establishing a progressive botanical narrative system that integrates trauma recording, spiritual healing and cultural reconstruction, this study highlights Morrison's ecological vision of cross-species equality and symbiosis, offering a substantial new materialist perspective for understanding the novel's profound connotations of racial suffering and spiritual redemption.

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