

FLESH “HUNGRY FOR ITSELF”: CONSUMPTION AND CULTURAL TRAUMA IN *BELOVED* AND *PARADISE*

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An insatiable hunger gnaws at the bowels of Toni Morrison’s characters in her novels *Beloved* and *Paradise*, feeding their excessive desire to fill an abysmal void left by cultural trauma. Morrison prepares a feast of food imagery, placing characters in the kitchen at critical narrative moments and centering key scenes around meal preparation and consumption. Two characters in particular—Baby Suggs, holy and Consolata—become victims of their appetites, experiencing devastating losses after attempting to sate their desires. Baby Suggs, holy, “hungrier than she had ever been in her life” after being freed from slavery, tries first to reunite her biological family and later establish a new spiritual family from the community around her (*Beloved* 170). Consolata, whose decades of celibacy lend an “edible quality” to her sexual desire, seeks solace consorting with Deacon, fleeing the confines of the convent to fulfill her craving (*Paradise* 228). Both characters’ hunger undermines them. Baby Suggs, holy’s meal of biblical proportions feeds her neighbors “so well ... it made them angry,” leading to Beloved’s death and her isolation from the community; Consolata, bent on “eating [Deacon] like a meal,” spirals into alcoholism and despair upon being abandoned, opening a path to conflict between the townspeople and the women of the convent (*Beloved* 161, *Paradise* 239). Setting the table with these and other instances of food imagery, Morrison establishes meal as metaphor, illustrating the causal connection between autonomy and its commiserate hunger for identity, all the while warning of the danger of internalizing Anglo-American values of capitalistic consumption.

Sethe’s hunger first emerges as she flees schoolteacher, fighting to reach Beloved so that she can breastfeed her daughter. Falling in the woods, overwhelmed by the physical toil of her pregnancy, a cannibalistic impulse seizes her, “[coming] up out of the earth into her” and making her “eager for

his eyes to bite into them . . . to gnaw his cheek” (*Beloved* 38). Critics Babae and Sion Ng, examining Sethe’s cannibalistic hunger, arrive at an ultimately maternal explanation for her urges: “perhaps the way she shows her love is inhuman, but that is the only way she can show her love under the system of slavery” (12). Other critics have noted the cannibalistic language Morrison uses to describe Sethe’s hunger. Robert Yeates observes that “Sethe feels a compulsion towards cannibalism when pregnant with Denver,” pointing out parallels to the Haitian zombi myth and signifying the ways in which it departs from its American zombie derivative (531). While the American zombie most often acts as an object of horror, Haitian myth positions the zombi as a slave-like figure enthralled by a sorcerer, warranting pity rather than fear. For Yeates, Morrison’s invocation of the zombie myth and her subsequent subversion of its cannibalistic connotations “[indicate] the indispensable nature of signifying in the formation of an identity separate from but connected to the dominant culture” (517).

Baby Suggs, holy’s hunger shares a similar subtext. She feels her hunger upon realizing “sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, she knew more about them than she knew about herself” (*Beloved* 165). Confronted with a lack of identity, Baby Suggs, holy fills her void by “digging up” what remains of her family (*Beloved* 173). Morrison fills Sethe and Suggs with hunger at the same point in each of their narrative arcs; upon receiving freedom, both women must learn to feed themselves. Baby Suggs, holy’s efforts to alleviate hunger extend beyond her own body and into her community. Days after Sethe arrives at 124, Baby Suggs, holy transforms two pails of berries into “ten (maybe twelve)” pies in order to share with her neighbors (*Beloved* 160, 161). Morrison alludes to the book of Matthew, in which Jesus feeds a crowd of five thousand from only two fish and five loaves, leaving “twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over” (NIV, Matthew, 14:20). Baby Suggs, holy plays the messiah, foreshadowing her own flesh becoming food.

In contrast to the biblical narrative, Baby Suggs does not insist her devotees cleanse themselves of sin in order to receive grace; instead, she only “offered up to them her great big heart,” presenting herself as a sacrifice to the hungry masses (*Beloved* 103). In her Clearing sermons she instructs her followers to “love your flesh” and “nourish your body,” cataloging the parts of the body she deems most precious from the “dark, dark liver” to the “beating heart,” showcasing the choicest cuts like a butcher (*Beloved* 103, 104). By suggesting her followers feed themselves from their own flesh, she teaches them to transgress. Baby Suggs, holy says slave masters “snatch away” the food meant for their own mouths and “give you leavins instead” (*Beloved* 104). Baby Suggs, holy preaches a message of self-sustenance; however, the lovingly cooked meal she offers to her neighbors—prepared from their own “shredded

clothes, bleeding hands, weltd face[s] and neck[s]”—fails to alleviate their hunger (*Beloved* 160).

The resentment Baby Suggs, holy’s neighbors display after eating her abundant meal becomes embodied Beloved’s flesh. When Beloved first arrives at 124 she craves sweet foods—“sugar could always be counted on to please her” (*Beloved* 66). Sethe caters to the cravings of Beloved, accommodating her appetite by sacrificing her own wellbeing, thinking “it was a recovering body’s need” (*Beloved* 66). Yet the more she eats, the stronger her hunger becomes, as Emma Parker points out Beloved’s attempt “to compensate for a sense of loss through consumption” (631). Sethe eventually becomes a prisoner to Beloved’s appetite, her body wasting away as Beloved becomes “plumper by the day” (*Beloved* 281). “Beloved hungers for love and Sethe hungers for forgiveness,” Parker notes of the parasitic relationship, suggesting that neither character receives any nourishment from the exchange (617). Denver watches as the two women crumple under the burden of their desires—“the hungrier they got, the weaker; the weaker they got the quieter they were” (*Beloved* 281). Like Baby Suggs, holy’s neighbors who retaliate against her by refusing to alert her of the approaching slave catchers, Sethe and Beloved respond to their hunger with silence. “Hunger could do that,” Denver observes, “quiet you down and wear you out” (*Beloved* 281). The neighbors and Beloved share what Parker calls a “monstrous appetite,” effectively a “response to . . . being devoured by slavery and . . . a struggle for survival” (632). Sethe’s offering of flesh fails just as tragically as that of Baby Suggs, holy. Trauma has consumed them both, leaving their bodies and offerings incomplete.

Beloved’s cravings threaten the social values of self sacrifice and collectivity, according to Parker. Morrison explicitly ties Beloved’s hunger to sugar, stating “it was as though sweet things were what she was born for” (*Beloved* 66). Using sugar as a symbol of the capitalist values undergirding slavery, “Morrison highlights the dangers of assimilating dominant (white, male, bourgeois) American cultural values,” Parker notes (618). The roots of the slave trade trace to exploitation of labor on Caribbean sugar plantations and the triangle trade which brought sugar to the American colonies. Beloved’s appetite for sugar alludes just as strongly to the slave trade as her nightmares of suffocating in the bowels of a slave ship (Parker 618). Linking Beloved’s cancerous hunger to exploitation and enslavement, Morrison levels a critique at the danger of internalizing the destructive desires of colonization. When Baby Suggs, holy’s meal leaves her neighbors “overfed” and “angry,” they isolate her out of envy for what they consider to be “too much” for an “ex-slave” to possess (*Beloved* 161). The surprise arrival of schoolteacher with the slave catchers and Sethe’s desperate attempt to prevent her family’s return to slavery testify the dissolution of a community. Giulia Scarpa argues that the neighbors’ reluctance to bring Sethe back into their social sphere stems “not from the crime she committed against her child, but rather... her stubborn refusal to

share her horror with the other women who witnessed it” (Scarpa 97). However, the neighbors bear at least as much responsibility as Sethe for the isolation of the Suggs family. Their envy, brought on by overconsumption, robbed Sethe of her children and kept her alone in grief.

The necessity of communal commiseration plays a key role in *Paradise*. Most of the people of Ruby, Oklahoma live in subdivided isolation, separated from each other by familial and religious affiliations. Patricia remarks that “the community used to be tight as wax,” but have since dissolved, consumed by pettiness (*Paradise* 207). The “irreconcilable differences” that divide the townspeople result in infighting, lingering resentments and, eventually, an end to the immortality of Ruby’s residents when the Convent women are killed (*Paradise* 9). Romero writes, however, that despite their ideological disputes, “what unites them is their misogyny and their decision to kill the convent women” (Romero 416). The self-sufficiency of the convent women and lack of any male authority in their presence pose a threat to the men of Ruby. The simple existence of Consolata and the wandering women she houses provoke such antipathy amongst the people of Ruby that even when the women are brutally butchered, the murderers face no explicit repercussions. The violent deaths of the Convent women occur just as they overcome the petty quarrelling and “babygirl wishes” that had hitherto driven them apart; having reached a level of sympathy and understanding for the suffering experienced by each of their fellow women, they are ritualistically slaughtered (*Paradise* 213).

The source of the townspeople’s hatred can be found in Ruby men’s hunger and the contrastingly fulfilled appetites of the convent women. The relative abundance of Ruby fails to satisfy its citizens' cravings. Ruby men now “hunt quail for pleasure rather than the desperate need to meet a wife and eight children at the table without shame” (*Paradise* 111). The oven, which once stood as a symbol of a community’s necessity-derived forbearance, now glistens with the graffiti of indolence. The convent women become the quarry of these pleasure hunters. K.D. views Gigi as a food object, “tripping through red coals” and “serving up her breasts like two baked Alaskas on a platter” (*Paradise* 53, 73). His ravenous pursuit of her sexuality leads him to the convent and places him at her mercy. As with Beloved’s appetite, K.D.’s hunger bears a confectionary connotation: “his craving for her had poisoned him, rendered him diabetic, stupid, helpless;” and, like Beloved, K.D.’s hunger resonates with imperialistic and cannibalistic connotations (*Paradise* 147). Gigi’s banishment of K.D. from her bed embitters him, the sting of rejection causing him to become a leading voice in the call to attack the convent. What K.D. and the men of Ruby cannot control cannot be suffered to survive. Consolata’s hunger contrasts this consumptive impulse. While she, too, initially is compelled by her sexual desire, the rejection clarifies the actual object of her longing: her own flesh.

After thirty years of celibacy, Consolata's affair with Deacon "smoothed her hunger to a blunt blade," driving her away from the control of the convent nuns (*Paradise* 236). Her rendezvous with Deacon radiate such powerful sexual longing that their lust becomes embodied in the world around them. Their meeting point centers on "two fig trees growing into each other," but, notably, "no figs ever appeared on those trees during the whole time they met there" (*Paradise* 230, 231). The sexual encounters between Deacon and Consolata likewise bear no fruit; though Deacon impregnates Soane during this time, Consolata remains childless. This barrenness seems indicative of the self-exploratory, masturbatory nature of Consolata's participation in the relationship.

During their first excursion to the fig tree meeting place, Deacon asks Consolata, "have you ever looked at yourself?" (*Paradise* 231). Her reply, "I'm looking now," foreshadows her later realization that her flesh is actually "hungry for itself" (*Paradise* 231, 263). Consolata initially mistakes her hunger in the same way that Beloved and Baby Suggs, holy's neighbors externalize their desires for self-knowledge, transmorphing it into cannibalistic hunger. Unlike Beloved and the neighbors, though, Consolata eventually learns the nature of her appetite. After being abandoned by Deacon, Consolata laments, "dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home" (*Paradise* 240). Consolata realizes that her cannibalistic impulses were only an externalized hunger that should have been directed towards herself. "My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him," she tells the other women of the convent (*Paradise* 263).

Consolata's confession echoes the message Baby Suggs, holy preached in the Clearing. Suggs, holy's charge to "love your flesh," matured by its deliverance through the mouth of Consolata, finally reaches an audience prepared to hear it (*Beloved* 103). Consolata manages to convey her experience to the convent women, telling them, "I will teach you what you are hungry for" (*Paradise* 262). Implicit in Consolata's lesson is a rejection of the divisions Christianity has caused in the town of Ruby. Romero agrees, writing, "*Paradise* suggests that Christianity works to divide the individuals from each other and from their world" (416). Consolata emerges from the burden of religious guilt by embracing a spirituality of empathy rather than punishment. Reckoning with loneliness after Deacon's abandonment, she equates the hunger she felt for him with the hunger of holy communion: "from Christ to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man. Shame. Shame" (*Paradise* 240). Consolata sees beyond the patriarchal power structure by exploring the magic beyond the edges of church doctrine; Lone Dupress—whose name and backstory nod to feminine social repression and isolation—teaches Consolata that "sometimes folks need more" (*Paradise* 244). "The text suggests that patriarchy and normative Christianity are predicated on these dichotomies and divisions," according to Romero, and that such institutions "contribut[e] to the subjugation of women" (415, 416). Consolata and the

convent women refuse subservient positions at the table of Christ's communion, shunning the cannibalism the meal requires.

As Gigi observes, the convent "was loaded with food" (*Paradise* 69). Consolata provides the women an alternative to the consumptive modes they had known before. "Feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst," she shares with them an alternative way of eating (*Paradise* 265). Feasting on this meatless fare, "they altered," Morrison writes (*Paradise* 265). The Convent provides the women with a wealth of nourishment and the women learn to dine in the way that Baby Suggs, holy once suggested. Their own bodies become the fare. The chapter titled "Consolata" re-explores the histories of each of the convent women, interjected by small paragraphs in which Consolata prepares a meal. These scenes culminate an image of the last supper—the final meal described before the men of Ruby arrive to slaughter them. Each of the women lay on the floor of the basement as Consolata "painted the body's silhouette," providing a template for them to fill with the traumas of their past (*Paradise* 263). They learn to love themselves; eating Consolata's meal, they were "reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (*Paradise* 265). The living bodies below—what Sethe calls rememories in *Beloved*—can never be entirely sated; they instead must feed the bodies they wear now. A lack remains after they have shed the ghosts of their past, but that lack no longer constitutes a consumptive hunger. As the disembodied, narrative voice of the "friend" observes, "the Convent women were no longer haunted" (*Paradise* 266).

Morrison's use of food imagery in *Beloved* and *Paradise* illustrates the painful, consumptive hunger born of cultural trauma. The cannibalistic craving of *Beloved* arises from the inability of Baby Suggs, holy's neighbors to adequately nourish themselves; their own flesh consumed by the horror of slavery. Sethe's dream of providing "milk enough for all" places her at the mercy of her haunted past; unable to reconcile the murder of her daughter with the maternal fantasy of adequately feeding her children, she becomes fodder for a hungry ghost (*Beloved* 118). Likewise, Consolata and the women of the Convent, "ravenous" in their desire for a place to belong, fall prey to the pleasure hunters of Ruby (*Paradise* 37). Their externalized hunger starves them until Consolata teaches them to direct their cravings inward. Baby Suggs, holy and Consolata both play the role of a feminine Christ figure; yet, instead of satiating hunger with the sacrifice of their own flesh, they demonstrate that their follower's "flesh is... hungry for itself" (*Paradise* 263). Accordingly, Morrison suggests that the hunger for autonomy and identity can't be satiated by the consumption of external societal values, but only through a fulfilment of the desire for self-love.

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