



Sacred Groves and the “Jungle Whitefolks Planted”: The Dynamic Symbolism of Trees in *Beloved*

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Introduction: the Forest Beyond Sethe’s Chokecherry Tree

From the images that exist of American slavery the most gruesome is that of Gordon (“A Typical Negro”), an escaped slave baring his back layered with scars from various whippings. They rise up like the furrows of a plowed field, crisscross like the streams of a delta, and sprout from his waist to then branch across his shoulders in the form of a tree. Such a gruesome photo forces the viewer to look upon slavery at its worst; and yet, as the title of the 1983 *Harper’s Weekly* article in which it was first published suggests, such a scar was a common sight at the height of slavery. Over a century and a half later, the photo now exists as a foundational image in the American consciousness surrounding the brutality of slavery. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison describes a comparable scar on the back of Sethe, a mother who escapes slavery. Similar to the picture of Gordon’s back, the novel forces the reader not only to look upon slavery but also to become wrapped in its cultural fabric. In many ways, Sethe’s account contains even more pain and brutality than Gordon’s picture, as the entire book is in part a narrative of her recovery from the wound. As with Gordon’s scar, Sethe’s scar resembles a tree, and Amy, a white girl who saves Sethe’s life during her escape, identifies the scar as a chokecherry tree (Morrison 79).

Critics have always paid close attention to Sethe’s chokecherry tree, offering dozens of possible interpretations of its significance; but until the late 1990s and early 2000s few critics studied the other tree images that exist alongside Sethe’s tree. As Scott R. Furtwengler outlines in his essay on tree imagery in novels authored by modern women, trees have many symbolic identities in the broader social consciousness, be it “cosmic life, vegetative life, organic unity, the phallus, the cross, and regeneration” (9). *Beloved*, however, explores trees within the specific consciousness of American slavery, where they have multivalent meanings: whips, switches, scars, and, paradoxically, the healing and regenerative power of nature and community. Among the first to attempt a comprehensive reading of the trees within *Beloved* was Michele Bonnet, who pays special attention to the healing power of trees in her argument that “the tree is a natural element that serves as a

law—and a sacred one at that—unto man” (42). Bonnet does considerable work to show that sacred groves,¹ or clusters of trees that hold spiritual significance for a culture, “play a crucial role in African religion” (42) and exist throughout Morrison’s work (i.e. the Clearing, Brother’s canopy, Denver’s bower, the ice-skating rink). In these instances, trees become synonymous with the genealogical tree, not in the nuclear sense that modern Americans think of, but in the “much broader extension it is given in the African culture Morrison claims as her own and which is understood as the clan, the community, [and] ‘the village’” (Bonnet 47). Thus, as Bonnet sees them, trees appear as agents of protection and healing, and as symbols of the larger African family. Throughout the novel, however, Bonnet notes that the “system of slavery tramples upon the principle materialized by [Sethe’s] tree” (48). Ultimately, Bonnet argues that the narrative and the tree images demonstrate that “beyond transgression lies regeneration” (53). Bonnet’s article posits that the trees in *Beloved* are positive until humans break or corrupt their natural law.

As Bonnet was one of the first to outline the symbolism of trees within the novel, her article has become something of a starting point for further discussion. Writing in direct response to Bonnet’s work, Lorie Watkins Fulton asserts “trees remain conflicted throughout the work” (189). Fulton argues that the ambiguity in the symbolism of the trees points to the “inherent ambiguity of the natural world and implies that the earth in and of itself is not as hopeless as it often seems” (198). Fulton complicates Bonnet’s argument that trees on the whole are regenerative when she suggests that many of the trees within the work are presented in far too negative a context to be interpreted as positive symbols; however, she fails to find a pattern in the positive and negative symbols. Similarly, critic Xu Ying focuses on the beauty and pain that seem to come with each tree image. She asserts that “the regenerative power of the tree assists black slaves to gain physical flight from slavery [. . . and] retrieve the lost ‘beauty’ in the southern pastoral scene” (13). Ying argues that the trees in *Beloved* present a dualism and are therefore both positive and negative symbols, but falls short in her discussion of the implications and relevance of her findings in the larger consciousness of American slavery. Other critics have focused on the religious aspects of trees, as with Glenda B. Weathers’ argument that centers on the Edenic nature of the Sweet Home plantation, the characters’ journey to the Promised Land, and the painful knowledge that comes from trees (209). Weathers unearths Christian imagery within the novel, but her argument does not make room for the presence of other religions, namely African religions and their relation to trees that Bonnet presents.

Critics writing on the topic of trees in *Beloved* collectively agree that the images are contradictory and that those who see trees as either entirely positive or negative fail to see the whole. As of yet, critics have examined tree images in the sequence in which Morrison presents them, in the convoluted crisscrossing order of memory. By reordering the characters’ dealings with trees to reflect a chronology, and thus ordering the seemingly random flow of fragmented memories, one sees that the tree symbolism changes dynamically throughout the novel. This dynamic² change also comes through in the charac-

teristics of the specific species of trees woven into the plot. While Fulton argues that every positive tree has a corresponding negative, and Ying asserts that the beauty of trees is balanced with the pain they cause, both fail to realize that the positive and negative manifestations of trees within Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are separated by time and that the haven trees provide dynamically changes into a hell. That is, the dynamic symbolism of trees first signifies the healing power of nature and community and then comes to signify the destructive power of slavery and white rule, which materializes as what one character titles the "jungle whitefolks planted" (Morrison 198). For the slaves, trees exist in two separate and yet connected periods of time with very conflicting connotations. A third period comes at the end of the novel with the exorcism of *Beloved*, an instrument of the whitefolks' jungle. Though Sethe's rescue from *Beloved* marks an attempt to reestablish the healing nature of trees and reassert the power of community, the whitefolks' jungle has by then become so integral in society that sacred groves and their keepers are forced to coexist with it, albeit in a fragile and endangered state.

Illusory Security of Sacred Groves: Trees Before the Dynamic Change in Symbolism

The first scene involving trees in the novel comes on the seventh page, but occurs more than eighteen years after Schoolteacher arrived on the Sweet Home plantation and the symbolism of trees began to shift. The scene represents the necessity of viewing trees chronologically in order to understand them, as it comes in the beginning of the novel but takes the reader past the middle of the story. Immediately before Sethe discovers Paul D on her porch, and a week before they both discover *Beloved* on the butternut stump in the yard (Morrison 50, 258), Sethe's mind unleashes a flood of memory that takes her and the reader back to the best and worst of Sweet Home:

and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that (Morrison 7).

While the first six pages of the novel introduce the reader to the main female characters and their home, this passage introduces many of the most persistent themes and images of the book. That the vision comes rolling into Sethe's mind uncontrollably, just as the hills and valleys of Sweet Home roll, speaks to the nature of memory represented in the novel. One feeling, word, or smell can trigger the remembrance of long strings of tightly knotted events and emotions, making the present full of the past for both Sethe and the reader. The

passage also introduces Sethe's motherly impulse and the shame she feels when that impulse is thwarted. It opens the discussion as to what "boys" and "children" she is speaking of, whether the emasculated Sweet Home men or her own children, Howard and Burglar. In part, this scene points to every black body she saw hanging from trees before she escaped, all of which she never clearly identified: her mother, hung from a tree (Morrison 61), or that which "had Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or his head" (198). The confusing images she saw of the past then inform and project what she fears to see in the future: the figures in the trees are also her runaway sons, Howard and Burglar, as in her dreams she sees "only their parts in the trees" (86). Whoever the figures, whether they are her own children, her mother, or the men "schoolteacher broke into children" (220), Sethe feels guilt and responsibility for their presence. It is as if Sethe, like the women she knew before Sweet Home, hung babies in baskets from trees so she could "see them out of harm's way while [she] worked the fields" (160) and then came back only to find them hanged with a rope around their necks. This gruesome vision exists outside of the novel's chronology, as it takes in memories from childhood and adulthood, and Sethe's visions of the future.

Along with the complicated identity of whoever hangs from the trees in Sethe's memories or dreams, the symbolism of trees is also complicated in this passage as within the novel, harboring negative within positive imagery. Every single leaf on the farm makes her want to scream, and yet there is an undeniable "shameless beauty" about the place. It may have been hell for those who lived there, but it was a "pretty place" to them as well. Most poetically, it may have had "fire and brimstone," but it was concealed in "lacy groves." In her detailed essay which focuses mainly on Sethe's chokecherry tree, critic Heike Harting considers the dualistic sycamore vision an instance of "Sethe's double perception of landscape" (42), which emphasizes her inability to privilege one set of the landscape's characteristics over another. Sethe therefore must exist within the contradictory space that she remembers, within hell and heaven and pain and beauty. While at first the positive images seem balanced with the negative ones, careful examination shows an important distinction: bad is hidden in good and disguised as good. It is not that the world of slavery is balanced, one joy for every horror, but rather that the joys are illusions, that it "never looked as terrible as it was." Where the horrors are hidden is of even greater importance: in "lacy groves" and "the most beautiful sycamores in the world." Just as groves, or outside rooms that provide privacy and afford shade, offer a sense of security, "the most beautiful sycamores in the world" also offer comfort and wonderment just by way of viewing them. Furthermore, "lacy," in its most common sense, connotes something of a similar nature to the ornamental, patterned work of weaving or cloth called lace. In this context it might describe the look of the leaves that make up the canopy, or hint at the domestic feeling the trees provide the viewer. Denotatively, however, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes "lace" also means "a net, noose, or snare" (OED), which parallels the hangings the trees support and the entrapment they facilitate. The beauty and comfort the sycamores afford appears to

be nothing more than a hollow illusion left by a successful trick. The trees, after all, are owned by the white slave masters, and were quite possibly planted by them as well. In the case of the sycamores, the trees are 100-foot tall³ edifices that soar over those who look upon them. Much like the large plantation mansions of the south with their towering white pillars, the grandeur and luxury of the trees are symbols of white power and authority. Whites hold the deed to their magnificence, and slaves can only long for them from a distance.

Sethe's sycamore vision is one of at least three moments of insight in the novel when the characters realize that Sweet Home and its trees were a beautiful illusion. Collectively, the moments suggest two periods: first of deception and then of disillusionment. Only pages after her vision of the sycamores, Sethe reemphasizes the beautiful illusion that was her time at Sweet Home. She remembers the "amazing luck" at being allowed to marry and parent all her children with the same man: "A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one" (Morrison 23). Sethe wrongly thought of Sweet Home as a blessing and relied on it being one, and thus established a false sense of security that eventually left her with more pain and suffering. She looked on the lacy groves and the southing sycamores as if the privacy, protection, and solace they seemed to offer were hers to experience. When it became clear to her they were owned by her master and were not for her, the illusion of security hurt more than if she had never experienced it at all. Sethe's disillusionment mirrors Paul D's revelation from later in the book, as he says when speaking about the Sweet Home men that "they had been isolated in a wonderful lie" (221). "Wonderful" because it gave them the illusion of power and manhood and because Brother and the trees of Sweet Home seemed to be truly fraternal, but a lie all the same, since that power and manhood was taken away as easily as it was given, and the trees were ultimately tools of white power. Both Paul D and Sethe's realizations imply a larger pattern: that before the time of disillusionment there was a time of illusion when they lived in comparatively ignorant bliss. In her article on the biblical significance of trees within *Beloved*, Weathers notes that Sweet Home "seemed to the male slaves a virtual sanctuary—a prelapsarian world in contrast to other plantations" (206). That is to say, at one point Sweet Home appeared to be something of an Eden. Both the men and the women wrongly believed it was a place where the trees were not only beautiful but also beneficent, and where "nobody said you-black-bitch-what's-the-matter-with-you" (Morrison 139) because the Garners, like the Bodwins, were "good whitefolks" (255). Furthermore, Sethe and Paul D's realizations assume that the illusory bubble that was Sweet Home eventually broke. With that disillusionment, trees, once the slaves' protectors and symbols of their community, took on a much darker, more painful connotation.

Among the beautiful trees that make up the landscape of Sweet Home when it exists as an Edenic place, the slaves hold a tree called Brother in the highest regard. As Paul D explains, Brother was his "choice" tree that he sat under "alone sometimes, sometimes with Halle or the other Pauls, but more often with Sixo" (Morrison 21). Brother embodied all Paul D knew about

trees: "trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did" (21). At this point in the chronology, trees are synonymous with protection and friendship, their limbs reaching out to embrace the downtrodden and lonely. In two ways, Brother even provided the Sweet Home men with sustenance: Sixo experimented with "night-cooked potatoes" (21) at the base of his trunk, and Sethe, when bringing out lunch for the men, placed their meals at "the foot of a tree" (23), most probably the foot of Brother.

As Paul D explains, he most often shared Brother's shade with Sixo, who was something of the high priest of trees on the plantation. Sethe and Paul both describe Sixo as having skin the color of "indigo" (Morrison 23) and as often speaking an African language rather than English. Because of his dark skin color and his affinity for his native language, it is fair to assume that Sixo is meant to represent a slave recently brought across on the Middle Passage, since native languages were commonly lost or eradicated by slave owners, and skin tones were often gradually lightened when white slave masters procreated with their slaves. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Sixo associates so closely with trees, since he is temporally closer to the religions of Africa. Sixo "went among trees at night" to dance and "keep his bloodlines open" (25). Such dancing among trees is a way to connect with his heritage, and, as Bonnet explains, "whip[s] up the flow of blood that illuminates his body" and infuses him with "vital energy" (42). Beyond just eating under Brother's arms and relaxing in its shade, Sixo actually gains spiritual life from being in the forest. The trees are also a place of escape for Sixo, as when he sneaks off Sweet Home in the night and a white passerby sees him: "Sixo had already melted into the woods before the lash could unfurl itself on his indigo behind" (Morrison 25). Here, in a moment of danger, the trees absorb Sixo, hiding him within their camouflage.⁴ Even as he readies for escape, after Sethe notices his "mind was gone from Sweet Home" because of the horror he came to see it as, Sixo is said to have "watched the sky [. . .] where it touched the trees" (197). To Sixo trees were innately familial, and when he could no longer access the fraternity Brother provided, he immediately began looking to trees outside the plantation for solace.

At the same time that Sethe, Sixo, and Paul D experience the beneficence of trees at Sweet Home, Sethe's mother in law, Baby Suggs, hosted sermons in the woods in a sacred grove called "the Clearing" (Morrison 86). In the warm seasons, many of the men, women and children from the Cincinnati community followed Baby Suggs to a "wide place cut deep into the woods" (87). There, preaching from "a huge flat-sided rock," much in the same way that Sixo rejuvenated his vital life among the trees, Suggs guided her flock to salvation. They first "watched her from the trees" and then ran in dancing, laughing, and crying, sharing love and finding grace in the only place they could, themselves (88). It is in the Clearing, with Suggs' sermons of self-love and her success at making societal roles "mixed up" (88), that the individuals who make up the African American community become whole within the disenfranchising context of slavery. In other words, the Clearing exists as a

perfect example of an African American community revolving around natural forest spaces. Though the woods sermons parallel the period when Sethe and Paul D still find comfort in the “lacey” trees of Sweet Home, the Clearing is distinctly different from the trees of the southern plantation. Where the sycamores are illusory from the beginning, the trees of the Clearing provide a complete haven for the African American community that only later becomes infected and fouled by the same pain hidden in the leaves of Sweet Home.

Though she goes to the bower after Baby Suggs’ death, and far after Suggs stops preaching in the woods, Denver’s boxwood bower exists as a sacred grove congruent with the Clearing, albeit with a slightly different function. The bower is Denver’s secret, a place “between the field and the stream” where “five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring” form a “round, empty room” (Morrison 28). The room is a sacred grove in microcosm, mirroring Brother and the Clearing, but displaced in time, since Denver goes to it after the significance of trees has dynamically changed for all other characters. It exists outside of the larger chronology of trees outlined in the rest of the novel, and yet it eventually reiterates and supports the same principles and images of the larger trajectory. In such a separated context, Denver can experience the power of trees as Paul D and her mother did at Sweet Home and as Baby Suggs did in the Clearing, long after those moments have passed from the story. “Closed off from the hurt of the world,” Denver’s imagination produced “its own hunger and its own food” (28). The bower, in some sense, is a terrarium or closed ecosystem, in which she needs only think to find food and in which the horrors of a horrible world cannot touch her. Ironically, Denver retreats to the isolated bower “because loneliness wore her out” (29). Similar to Sixo and Paul, groves fill up her loneliness as people might for others and provide her with voices of comfort and solace. In the bower, “protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as wish” (29). Many have argued that Denver first begins to masturbate in the bower and it is therefore a place of self-discovery and transition into womanhood, citing her behavior that “thrilled the rabbits before it confused them” (28), her ripeness (29), and that she must dress herself to leave (29). In light of this interpretation and the other aspects of the grove, it is clear that the boxwood grove offers Denver security and even deliverance from the trials of her world. The grove provides Denver with a place for solace, self-discovery, and deliverance from the pain of her world in a time when the majority of characters are blinded by the maleficence of trees. That her place of security is eventually tainted as Sethe and Paul D’s is implies that the illusion of sacred groves and the white power they hide is a problem that affects African Americans even post-slavery.

Though disguised by the crisscross of memory in which Morrison presents it, a distinct period exists when trees appear beneficent and familial for each of the major characters. For Sethe, Paul D, and Sixo, this period begins at the Sweet Home plantation, but ultimately amounts to a cruel illusion. For Suggs and her northern community, the Clearing affords the wondrous healing power of a sacred grove; and for Denver, the boxwood bower exists as

a natural place of solace and self-discovery. However, just as the trees of Sweet Home dynamically change for Sethe and Paul D, the Clearing and the bower also alter for the worse, symbolizing a larger shift in tree symbolism within the novel.

“No Clearing, No Company”: The “Jungle Whitefolks Planted” Takes Root

While sacred groves and the healing power of trees run throughout Sethe and Paul D's memories of Sweet Home, the symbolism of trees dynamically changes upon Schoolteacher's arrival, and the change reverberates far beyond the plantation to affect the Clearing and Denver's Bower. Oddly enough, Stamp Paid gives the most succinct explanation of what the trees come to symbolize, a man who never set foot on Sweet Home but nonetheless experienced the atrocities of slavery and the injustices of white slave masters. His insight comes when he attempts to knock on the door of 124 and is assaulted by what he believes to be “the mumbling of the black angry dead” (Morrison 199). Angry, “undecipherable” voices that had not “lived a livable life” because “whitefolks believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle” (198). At no point did whites suspend their suspicions and instead protected themselves by degrading African American people as if at any moment a panther might jump from behind their dark skin. However, as Stamp explains, this was not a jungle that was brought over on the Middle Passage with the African people, but rather, “the jungle whitefolks planted in them” (198). The jungle was a primal and animalistic projection of how whites saw the slave and what they needed the slave to be in order to quiet the rumblings of their own consciences. This whitefolks' jungle grew and spread, entangling the African Americans the more they resisted it (198). To cope with such a hostile environment, geared in every way against their survival, the slaves had to either kill (as Sethe does) or silence their hearts (as in Paul D does). Eventually, the jungle “invaded the whites who made it,” making them “screaming baboons” that were “bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be” (198-99). By dehumanizing their slaves, the white slave masters forfeited part of their own humanity, leaving both slave and master in a destructive animalistic relationship, each side playing roles that would not exist outside the context of slavery. The idea of “the jungle whitefolks planted” (198) connects the slave, the African American community, and the slave master with trees in a very different way than the idea of the sacred grove. Opposite to the “grove,” which connotes a place of sanctuary and solace, the “jungle” connotes an overgrown tangled mass of vegetation riddled with danger, darkness, and confusion. The whitefolks' jungle, as it exists on the landscape and in the minds of the slave and the slave master, is just as tangled with danger and destruction.

Among all of the criticism on trees in *Beloved*, only two critics candidly mention the concept of the whitefolks' jungle (Paquet and Nouvelle 257; Fulton 191), and even they, only briefly. Whatever the lack of previous atten-

tion paid by critics, the concept throws multiple scenes from the novel into shocking relief. Sethe's sycamore vision, for instance, gains an even more distressing element in light of Stamp Paid's idea of the whitefolks' jungle: sycamores shed their bark as they grow, leaving the upper trunks and branches stark white.⁵ Thus, when looking at the black boys hanging from the trees, she is looking into a jungle of white. One might even imagine a grove of sycamores resembling a march of white hooded figures, reaching taller than any building and embodying the ultimate power of white supremacy. While introduced near the end of the book by Stamp Paid, this concept takes form from the very beginning in Sethe's sycamore vision and manifests both physically and mentally for many of the different characters.

Though the reader first encounters Sethe after she has become disillusioned with Sweet Home and its trees, as the narrative unfolds her memories depict the exact beginning of the change in tree symbolism for her. The change comes after Mr. Garner passes away and Lillian Garner asks Schoolteacher, her brother in law, to manage the farm for her. In an attempt to retrieve a "piece of muslin" (Morrison 192) to protect her baby from bugs, Sethe overhears Schoolteacher instructing his pupils to delineate her human characteristics from her animal ones (193). By teaching that Sethe is only partially human, he projects animality onto her character that she may not be able to evade, a self-fulfilling prophesy that he expects to find, then observes, and finally forces upon Sethe. Harting goes to great lengths to show that by objectifying Sethe, "Schoolteacher legitimates his racist ideology of white supremacy" so that "the debasement of the black slaves to an animal-like state becomes a necessary precondition for the construction of his own humanity and self-image" (37). In other words, Schoolteacher rationalizes his horrid actions and beliefs to protect his own humanity, but by doing so only further cripples his own morality. As the scene unfolds, and Sethe backs away from the shocking lesson, she remembers "when I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly" (Morrison 193). This prickly feeling lingers, making her head itch "like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp" (193). Fulton stipulates that in hitting her head Sethe "becomes a metaphoric tree attacked by the hummingbirds that cause her to shut down all thought and simply act" (191). Fulton fails to see, however, that the hummingbird-itch does not signify a termination of thought, but rather a rapid expansion of thought. Sethe's becomes immersed in a complex network of memories and emotions, and her thoughts immediately string together the history of violence and pain she has experienced. For example, that the itching comes from a tree does not seem of much significance within this scene alone, except that while this is the first chronological instance of Sethe's itching sensation, it is the second of four as they appear within the novel. The first comes when Schoolteacher enters the yard of 124 to reclaim her and her children and she hears the wings of little hummingbirds that "stuck their needle beaks right through her head cloth into her hair and beat their wings" (Morrison 163). In this instance it is the needle beaks that send her into a frenzy to kill her children. The third comes directly after the incident when Sethe asks Mrs. Garner to define the word

“characteristic” and she continuously scratches her head (195). Finally, the fourth, a mirror of the first, comes near the end of the novel when she again “hears wings,” feels “needle beaks right through her head cloth” (262), and then attempts to kill Mr. Bodwin, who she thinks is Schoolteacher. All of these instances collectively point to the moment when Sethe realizes Schoolteacher saw her as subhuman, the moment when Sethe realizes, in Stamp Paid’s words, that no matter what she did Schoolteacher would always see a “screaming baboon” (199) under her skin.

Adding even more poignancy and significance to the lesson she overhears, Sethe comes to believe that Schoolteacher could not have taught his pupils, could not have animalized her, if she had not made the ink that he uses in his classroom. Defeated and lost at the end of the novel, Sethe cries to Paul D, “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (Morrison 271). In a similar way to how she shames herself for the “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (7), Sethe blames herself for what the ink she made enabled. By not specifying exactly what Schoolteacher has done and leaving his actions as “it,” Sethe totalizes all of his negative effects and overburdens herself with responsibility for them. Not surprisingly, the ink is tied to trees just as the boys were, since she made the ink from “cherry gum and oak bark” (6). Thus, the moment when she hears Schoolteacher’s lesson represents a turn in tree symbolism. The ink she made from bark helps to reinforce Schoolteacher’s bigotry, and the tree that bumps Sethe’s head makes a mark that sticks with her for years to come as she travels through a land of white power. To make matters worse, Schoolteacher’s pupils, the products of his pseudoscience lessons, turn on Sethe while she is late in her pregnancy with Denver, stealing her milk as one might from a cow or goat. In this moment, they take Schoolteacher’s message that she is subhuman quite literally and treat her no differently than any other barn animal. Their actions against a human being reflect very negatively on their own humanity and thus the animalistic “jungle invaded the whites who made it” (188-89). In retaliation for Sethe’s telling Mrs. Garner of the pupils’ misdoing, “they took down the cowhide” (228) and gave her the whipping that cut the scar that burdens her back for the rest of her life. Sethe first introduces the scar as “a chokecherry tree,” complete with “trunk, branches, and even leaves” (17). As noted above, this specification comes from Amy, a “whitegirl” (17). Though critics often view Amy in a positive light because she saves Sethe’s life, by deeming Sethe’s tree a “chokecherry,” she plants its multivalent meanings. Thus, in name, in physical form, and in mental power, whites plant the tree on Sethe’s back. All together, the trees on which Sethe bumps her head, from which she makes the ink, and which her scar resembles, point to a dynamic change in the symbolism of trees and their relation to white power.

As previously mentioned, critics have gone to extensive lengths to interpret Sethe’s tree. Some agree it is a symbol for the atrocities of slavery and, in Bonnet’s case, “an active, living tree with an irrefutable power and reality of its own” (46). Others insist it is a euphemism that transforms the pain of slavery into something full of life and nourishment, as with Ying, who believes

it “offers Sethe sustaining hope to escape from this life-depriving slavery past” (4). Heike Harting surpasses all other interpretations and asserts, “Morrison’s metaphor suggests performative modes of identification that insist on permanent reinventions and recombinations of presumed identities through cultural and historical particularities” (24). She notices the metaphor is not stable, but continually shifts and morphs depending on the immediate social context in which it is given shape.

Of all of the critics who discuss Sethe’s tree, Harting goes to greatest length to elucidate the significance of the chokecherry species:

The chokecherry tree, whose fruit is poisonous and astringent, mainly occurs in the former American centres of slavery, Virginia and the Carolinas, where it is also called black chokecherry. [. . .] Furthermore, the deceptive quality of the chokecherry tree and its connotation of blackness link it to at least three thematic issues of the novel. First, the nominal specification of the tree indicates that blackness is not natural but constructed as threat, as something that cannot be trusted, something that deviates from the norms of nature. Second, the image indicates the perils of making judgments based on outer phenomena, and of disregarding the complexity of nature which cannot be grasped in generalizing terms. Third, from a different angle, the chokecherry tree implies the self-protective qualities of deception, encoding or masking, to use analogous terms, since these qualities not only provide a strategy to resist cultural representation and domination, but also generate communicative and performative modes that subvert the master code. (25)

That the tree on Sethe’s back is named a chokecherry tree is no coincidence. As the name implies, black chokecherries are bitter and noxious, and therefore imply that “black” is also bitter and noxious. The trees are most common to the centers of American slavery, rooting their significance in the very landscape in which Sethe receives the scar and from which she then flees. The first thematic issue that Harting identifies within the connotations of the chokecherry tree could very well have come from the mouth of Stamp Paid. “Blackness is not natural but constructed as a threat” (Harting 25) because under every dark skin hides a jungle (Morrison 198). Here the norms of nature are conflated with the norms of civilized society, and what is ‘natural’ is ideal, ordered, pure, and white. The second of the thematic issues Harting raises is just as pertinent: in “disregarding the complexity of nature” (25) or, in Morrison’s words, simplifying an entire culture to “swinging screaming baboons” (198), whites open themselves to the very hatred and bigotry they projected on the slaves. Fulton seconds Harting’s point, stating that Sethe’s scar discusses “the tangled jungle that, rooted inside of each slave, grows to touch even the masters who created it” (191). Lastly, the chokecherry tree points to the possibility that African Americans can use their misunderstood identity, or invisibility, if you will, to better survive in a system rigged against them—that is, if they realize the possibility. Of the three themes that the chokecherry species is linked to, the last is least explored within the novel. Besides Sixo, who actively

works against the system Schoolteacher sets up, most of the slaves are too deep in the illusion of Sweet Home to act out. Undeniably, then, the chokecherry tree species is symbolic of the very principles outlined as the whitefolks' jungle. The tree was planted by whites both mentally, as Schoolteacher taught his pupils to animalize the slaves of Sweet Home, and physically, as his pupils planted the bloody whitefolks' jungle in the skin of Sethe's back with a cowhide. In many ways, Sethe's chokecherry scar is emblematic of the jungle planted in all slaves by their white masters, an infection that eventually destroys both the host and the infector.

While the whitefolks' jungle is planted both mentally and physically, Sethe's story seems to suggest that the mental manifestation of the jungle causes the most self-destruction. After all, it is the tree on Sethe's back, and the pain and injustice of Sweet Home of which it reminds her, that leads her to believe, "It ain't my job to know what's worse [than the plantation]. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (Morrison 165). Paul D sardonically calls this "safety with a hand-saw" (164), since it is the very mentality that rationalizes her attempt to kill her children (and her success at killing her daughter) in order that they may not be sent south again. In other words, it is the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back, the painful symbol of the whitefolks' jungle planted by Schoolteacher and his pupils, which drives Sethe to commit a previously unthinkable act that destroys her family and herself. In this context, the method and nature of the murder is of particular importance. The girl that is then called the "crawling-already? baby" (93) and later presumed to be Beloved, was killed with a handsaw in the woodshed (149, 157). Even more, Stamp Paid remembers that Sethe "*split* to the woodshed to kill her children" (emphasis added, 158). Indeed, many critics have found the same connection. Fulton states that "it seems almost too easy to read *Beloved* as a metaphorical tree" (194); and Bonnet asserts that "the victim of the murder [Beloved] is constantly associated with a felled tree" (45). The undeniable tree and wood imagery that is connected with the daughter's murder implies that the infanticide Sethe commits is synonymous with the felling of a tree. Not just any tree, however, but a tree that grew from her own seed or, to use another image, a branch from her own trunk. With the slice of her daughter's throat, Sethe severs her bloodline, be it her immediate genealogical tree, her cultural connection to the sacred groves of Africa, or her ties to the larger community. Her attempt to "out hurt the hurter" (234) causes Sethe to enact and perpetuate the hatred and destruction of the whitefolks' jungle on the very thing that is closest to her, her own daughter and, as a result, herself. Though trees were once thought to be guardians and healers, Sethe's act further inscribes the symbolism of trees with violence against African Americans. By killing her daughter she disseminates the idea of the whitefolks' jungle and completes the transition of trees into symbols of white power, branding the backs of African Americans and sawing their families apart.

Eighteen years after the murder, when Beloved appears in the narrative and is assumed to be the baby's ghost incarnate, she appears as a felled tree, sitting on "a stump not far from the steps of 124" (Morrison 51). A num-

ber of critics have read *Beloved's* arrival positively, as if she rests on the stump to rejoin the body she was forced to leave behind. Weathers, for instance, argues that the stump "suggests renewal, for *Beloved* has emerged from the death to sit on the stump, much like a new sprout would grow from its original source" (208). Further analysis shows that any celebration at *Beloved's* sprouting should be checked with caution. Woven into this 250-word passage at least three times is the word "lace." She has "lace edging" (50) on her dress, her shoes are "unlaced" (51), and has "good lace at the throat" (51). While the last example harkens back to the scar left by the handsaw, the three instances collectively point to Sethe's sycamore vision where the "lacy groves" (7) offered beauty along with entrapment. They seem to exist as a warning against *Beloved's* arrival, suggesting, like the sycamores, that her beauty and nature are riddled with poison and pain. *Beloved's* murder was a result of the white-folks' jungle that Schoolteacher and his pupils planted in her mother, both physically, with the chokecherry scar that convinced Sethe she would never return south, and mentally, with Sethe's self-destructive animalistic behavior. *Beloved* is ultimately a destructive figure disguised in beauty, who further severs Sethe from her kin and community much as Schoolteacher does. Her second coming, therefore, resembles the sprouting of a seed planted by whites, and her body, an instrument of the damaging jungle.

Of all the characters in the novel, Paul D holds on to the beneficence of trees the longest in the novel's chronology of events, but only by denying the maleficent trees that enter his life. After his attempted escape from Sweet Home, Paul D is eventually sent to a work camp on which he allows himself one "little love": "an aspen too young to call a sapling" (Morrison 221). The aspen appears at first to assist Paul D, to confirm life in spite of the songs he sings that murdered it. However, a number of critics read the aspen quite differently. Bonnet notes that the aspen has "an ambivalent function, for its tiny size also provides a comment on slavery's devastating force" (46). "It is impossible," she continues, "for saplings to grow into real trees, for life to develop and flourish, in a world ruled by slaveholders" (Bonnet 46). In obvious agreement with Bonnet, Harting states that the aspen implies a "self-destructive, internalized violence" (46). Analysis supports their claims: that the tree cannot even be "called a sapling" serves as a reminder that Paul D cannot be called a man, much as the rooster named Mister mockingly reminds him. Both the aspen shoot and Paul D cannot grow into adulthood and are therefore stuck in perpetual adolescence. The shoot cannot provide Paul D with strength, because, just as Paul D repeatedly trembles throughout the novel (Morrison 106, 117), aspens are culturally known for their leaves that seem to tremble or shake in the wind.⁶ Paul D's small shoot shows that he would no longer find stability in trees. Paul D senses the change in trees when he contrasts the aspen with the "old, wide and becoming" (221) nature of Brother. And yet, even though the aspen is certainly not the type of tree he once found solace under, at that point in the chronology he finds it easier to maintain his illusion than to discover a change in the meaning of trees. Making matters even worse, the aspen was "the kind of thing a man would cut to whip his

horse" (221), the kind of thing a *white* man would cut to whip his horse or, most probably, his slave. Paul D does not need to think hard to imagine how his "little love" could become a violent weapon for whites, and thus an instrument of the whitefolks' jungle. The aspen may be in the same position as him—stuck in adolescence, quaking with uncertainty and fear, unable to provide stability and shelter—but the parallel only serves to remind Paul D of the ruin to which his life has come.

Once Paul D escapes from the work camp in Alfred, Georgia, he seems to discover a sort of transient freedom; however, he has been freed only from the South, not from the reign of the whitefolks' jungle. Critics often see Paul D's escape north as a very positive moment in the novel. That he takes a Cherokee man's advice to "follow the tree flowers" (Morrison 112) and eventually ends up at Sethe's chokecherry tree is most often seen as a moment of spring and new beginnings and as a positive turn in Paul D's life. Most notably, Bonnet assert that since the blossoming trees are known to be "active catalysts of his spiritual rebirth, they are shown to have a creative force of their own, the faculty of generating the life that goes with freedom" (43). Bonnet asserts the trees not only rebuild his spirit but also help him build a new understanding of life as a free person. Of the ten blossoming trees (Morrison 112-3) he follows north, however, more than half of them are varieties cultivated either for production or landscape ornamentation⁷ and are therefore planted and owned by the only group of people that could own anything at that time: white men. Thus, by escaping north, "Free North. Magical North" (112), Paul D evades slavery, but does not escape bigotry or white rule. The trees of the north only provide a false haven, as he is still very much physically and mentally within the "jungle that whitefolks planted" (198).

The idea that Paul D has escaped north but not found freedom resurfaces time and time again, most movingly when he has left 124 to live at the church that was once a dry goods store. There, "on the porch steps" with "warmth from a bottle of liquor" (Morrison 218), Paul D sits under a "white oak cross" (218), most probably painted white. After leaving Sethe and in an attempt to distance himself from her misery, Paul D wallows in his memories about the aspen, Mr. Garden and Schoolteacher of Sweet Home, and finally about the failed escape and Sixo's murder. Not until this moment, only days from the end of the novel's chronology, does Paul D finally see Sweet Home and its trees as an "isolated lie" (221). Pages later, when speaking to Stamp Paid, a white man on horseback interrupts the two to ask for directions to a prostitute's house. Before leaving, the white man verbally chastises Paul D for drinking on the church's step, saying, "There's a cross up there [. . .]. Seems to me like you ought to show it some respect" (231). Even as an outsider in a black neighborhood which he enters only to find cheap sex, the white man still has the nerve to lecture Paul D on indecent behavior in the presence of a cross. In essence, the man is displaying his own authority over the white cross, made from a white oak tree, as if to say, "This may be your community, but I own the land and the religion, and that tree is part of my jungle." The white man's warning immediately reemphasizes Paul D's realization that he has not escaped

bigotry and white rule.

Even the Clearing, arguably the novel's most effective sacred grove, is eventually subsumed by whites, and comes to act as a symbol for the isolation and sickness that falls over the black community. After Baby Suggs dies, Stamp Paid attempts to follow Sethe's only instructions to "Take her to the Clearing" but cannot because of "some rule whites had invented about where the dead should rest" (Morrison 171). Suggs' body is barred from the very place of sanctuary where she felt most herself, where she helped people to love themselves and each other, because of white authority that was "invented" out of thin air. When Sethe returns to the Clearing after many years, she notices that whites have advanced their authority over the woods, saying that "because big-city revivals were held there regularly [. . .] the old path was a track now" (89). The changes are even more apparent when Denver, Beloved, and Sethe rest in the Clearing, much in the same fashion of Sugg's sermons with "Denver and Beloved watching her from the trees" (95). The scene turns for the worse, however, when unseen hands strangle her and then Beloved inappropriately kisses her. The entire scene is one distorted with isolation, where Sethe reminisces of times when she still had "women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with" but realizes that at that moment "there was no one" (98). She finds security in Beloved's presence but only by ignoring her intuition that "the thumbs that pressed her nape were the same" (98) and Beloved was the one who strangled her. It is no coincidence that Beloved "choked" (96) Sethe and Sethe's tree is a *chokecherry*, as both grew from the same destructive force. While Sethe's tree, planted by white men, chokes her of life and infects her with the whitefolks' jungle, Beloved, a product of the fear and pain Sethe's scar symbolizes, chokes Sethe both physically and psychologically. Bonnet overlooks all of the ways the Clearing changes when she states that the trees of the grove "are not merely a setting; they are truly active participants whose salutary role is to be measured by the miracle worked among them" (44). The grove may have housed miracles, but only within a certain period. The Clearing is now filled with danger, fraud, and whitefolk. In Fulton's words, the Clearing "inverts the fairy-tale notion of the enchanted clearing as a place of healing to turn it into a site of delusion" (193), delusion that, in large part, stems from Beloved. Just as Beloved affects Sethe's relationship with the Clearing, she also radically changes Denver's relationship with her boxwood bower. Denver notes multiple times that "she had not been in the tree room once since Beloved sat on their stump" (Morrison 90). Beloved's captivating presence makes it seem as though Denver has no need for the comfort, solace, and self-discovery she once found in the sacred grove of boxwood. Both the Clearing and the bower change for the worse, all because of events or people connected to the whitefolks' jungle.

Through Sethe's changed relationship with the Clearing, her experience directly shows how trees are tied to community and sick or sliced trees with broken communities. Sethe sums up the isolation and violence that the Clearing has come to symbolize when she thinks the phrase, "No Clearing, no company" (Morrison 184), implying that with the loss of the Clearing, the end

of the woods sermons and the whites' appropriation of the land, she also lost her community. In another instance, Sethe traces the loss of the Clearing and her isolation back to her own murder of her daughter, stating that "[Suggs'] authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call . . . all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard" (177). While the community first turned up their noses when Suggs and Sethe had a party out of "reckless generosity" (137), the community turned away after Sethe cut her own tree with a hacksaw. It was then, and only then, after what Stamp Paid calls "the Misery" (171) that Suggs gave up on preaching and the power of the Word, and the Clearing was lost as a sacred grove and place of African American community. Most significantly, it was only then that the community itself became sick, by way of its own pride and imposition of isolation.

Many have spoken of the isolation of Sethe and her family from the surrounding community, but very few have noted the community's own disease, as evident by the trees within the neighborhood. In a conversation rich with discussion about the Clearing, the community, and Baby Suggs' quitting of the Word (Morrison 177), Stamp Paid gives Suggs directions for a delivery by pointing her to a house with "two chestnuts in the yard. Sick, too" (178). When they reach the house and its trees, with the smell of burning leaves in the air, he gestures to the chestnuts: "Big trees like that, both of em together ain't got the leaves of a young birch" (179). Historically, this was the time of the American chestnut blight that eradicated the majority of mature chestnut trees in North America,⁸ so it makes sense that these trees are sick. In this passage, however, Morrison uses the chestnut blight to symbolize blight in the community. The trees are "big trees," like Brother, and yet could provide no more shade or protection than Paul D's trembling aspen. Thus, trees have become sickly just as the community has become sickly, shutting out Suggs and her kin from the sanctuary and shelter of the community grove when they needed it most.

The sickness of the community displayed through trees is amplified to a different degree many years later when Denver finally leaves the house in search of work. Nervous to greet a community that she grew up knowing did not accept her, Denver walks down Bluestone Road only to notice a sycamore tree in at the fourth house from her own. The buds⁹ of the tree "had rained down on the roof and made the yard look as though grass grew there" (Morrison 245). Offering a casual wave, the women in the doorway then froze her hand "near her shoulder as she leaned forward to see whom she waved to" (245). Ying wrongly suggests that buds represent the hopes for fresh life Denver will have in the black community (6). Far from an open-armed welcome, the woman's friendly gesture is only an illusion, as she withdraws her amity upon realizing to whom she waved. Even more, the defining figure of her yard, a sycamore tree, is the same species that tricks Sethe with its beauty and damages her with its pain. The sycamore Denver spies is also misleading, as its dry and spiny buds only give the illusion of a lawn, the false appearance of life. As the sick chestnuts and the deceptive sycamore show, the community is just as diseased in their pride as Sethe is in her own.

**“With All Its Heat and Shimmering Leaves”:
Regaining Community and Reclaiming Trees**

As the novel comes to a close, many characters make attempts at redemption; though a number succeed, the whitefolks’ jungle and the destruction it has produced cannot be uprooted as easily as it was planted. Of the most promising examples of regeneration is Denver’s attempt to broaden her world by reaching out to the local community and, in turn, the community’s positive reception of her. After reaching a state of crisis with her mother and the parasite Beloved has become, Denver decides to leave home in search of work and, in some way, in search of help. However, she has a moment of paralysis on the porch where she thinks of the white world she will come into contact with for the first time in years, and remembers her grandmother’s words: “they could prowl at will [. . .] and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did” (Morrison 244). Suggs’ words point to the jungle Stamp Paid describes, as whites, after being infected with the jungle they planted, can “prowl” like panthers without consequence and act not as humans but as “screaming baboons” (198). Sadly, Suggs’ words also apply to the African American community through which Denver will walk. Though she no doubt fears them in a different way than she does the whites, their choice to not support their kin instills her with fear for their reactions. There can be no defense from either of these fears, as Denver acknowledges in a conversation with Suggs; and yet, as Suggs sagely suggests, Denver must “know it, and go on out the yard” (244). That is to say, she must recognize the forces that work against her, the probability of her defeat, and yet still have the brass strength to make a life beyond the false comfort of isolation.

Upon Denver’s leaving of the yard, the community slowly begins to reaccept her and her mother as members.¹⁰ Most significantly, community members start leaving food “on the tree stump at the edge of the yard” (Morrison 249). The miscellaneous food items are perched on the butternut stump just as Beloved is upon Denver, Sethe, and Paul D’s return from the carnival (50, 259). Tree stumps themselves suggest absence, a place where there once was life but there is no longer. Put simply, they are scars of natural violence and, in the context of *Beloved*, of violence against African Americans inflicted by both sides of the racial divide. Before she reappears in the flesh, the ghost of Beloved is a sort of tree stump, persisting only to remind others of the violent slice that killed her. Thus, anything placed on a tree stump might imply an attempt to regrow the dead tree and replace the life the violence took away. Yet the implication of Beloved on the stump is radically different than of the food gifts on the stump. Furtwengler notes that while the stump represents “isolation from community” with Beloved sitting upon it, the significant of the stump changes and “becomes a symbolic representation of inclusion in the community” (41). Beloved’s arrival on the stump is riddled with warning that her presence does not bode well, as hinted at in the triple use of the word “lace.” As a ghost she may have symbolized a tree stump, but when she returns in the flesh she is more akin, in her appearance and in her destructive

nature, to a tree of the whitefolks' jungle. In contrast, "sacks of white beans," "plate of cold rabbit meat," and "basket of eggs" (249) are symbolic gifts of kindness. Rather than paralleling Beloved's arrival, the bits of food are meant to displace Beloved's presence, to fill the void that she perpetually widens. In other words, the community's food gifts provide nourishment while Beloved's destructive hunger has left a wake. That is not to say the "kindness" left on the tree stump (252) was not as selflessly given as the community members would have Denver believe. Each giver still made her kindness known with a simple slip of paper containing a name or mark (249). Each note, however practically necessary, seems in some way to be a personal apology for the giver's "distain" and "meanness" (249) and a way of welcoming Denver back into the larger community. Thus, Denver is healed physically and socially at the same time that the community heals itself and its transgressions, all by way of a tree stump.

Along with Denver's redemption, the climax of the novel wherein the community rescues Sethe also contains distinct tree imagery. Thirty women assemble (Morrison 257) outside 124 and immediately are transported eighteen years into the past to Suggs' party, before their "envy that surfaced the next day" (258) and "the Misery" of Sethe's infanticide, and one year before Sethe got out of jail and "made no gesture towards anybody" (256). In their transported vision, it becomes the yard they knew, the yard of the old women who held "woods services" (254) with whom they prayed and sang. To the yard of the past, full of memories of the Clearing and Baby Suggs, the women of the community begin to sing and pray once again. When Sethe hears the call, she cannot help but be transported as well:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The singers bring the Clearing not as it was when Sethe visited with Denver and Beloved, owned by the whites and reminiscent of their violence, but as it was when Suggs preached there, in all of its sacred glory and communal strength. "With all its heat and simmering leaves" and "knock the pods of chestnut trees" are two images quoted directly from the time when the Clearing still functioned as a sacred grove. While the first speaks to the overwhelming command of the scene, and the second to the resonance human voices have within the location, both imply the power and magnitude the grove affords. Only community makes this power possible, by "building voice upon voice" until the note echoes among the "ringing trees" (87). As Paquet and Nouvelle note, the women's chanting opens "a new potential line of descent about to blossom out of a unified and revived trunk" (122) for Sethe. In a single song Sethe hears potential for the future of her kin and herself, along with potential for the unification of her community and the trees that enliven it. Through this

power, Sethe is cleansed, and catches a glimpse of the world filled with “loving faces” (Morrison 262) she once knew, but only a glimpse.

Within seconds Sethe “hears wings” and feels “beaks through her headcloth” (Morrison 261), pointing to the very instance when trees change from sacred groves to the whitefolks’ jungle. As thoughts of the injustices of Sweet Home, the animalistic projections of Schoolteacher’s lessons, and the tree planted on her back come rolling in, Sethe gives way to the impulse that first guides her to kill her child and now guides her to kill the white man “coming into her yard” (262). As a result of the power of the whitefolks’ jungle over Sethe, the community’s rescue cannot be completed. The trees they bring to Sethe with the Clearing cannot be disentangled from the trees of the whitefolks’ jungle, just as the boys cannot be detached from the souging sycamores of Sweet Home. While she may find community again, even at times amongst trees, the wholeness she once found will never again captivate her as it did in the groves of Sweet Home.

Along with Sethe’s partial rescue, *Beloved*’s physical retreat suggests a shift in the nature of the whitefolks’ jungle, and, as a result, a final chronological period in the symbolism of trees. After *Beloved*’s disappearance, which comes in part from the curative force of the women’s song, the trees still contain the potential for pain and violence. Ella, one of the most prominent women in the community, suspiciously suggests the ghost “could be hiding in the trees waiting for another chance” (Morrison 264). Ella fears the trees harbor *Beloved*, giving her sanctuary as though she were just one more sycamore on the rolling hills. As a “lacey” instrument of the whitefolks’ jungle, *Beloved* symbolizes the very horror that waits for the members of the African American community, be it the whites who “prowl at will” or the blacks who inflict violence upon each other to survive. While the first period of tree symbolism poses trees as comforting illusions, and the second as infectious tools of the white enemy, the third chronological period in the dynamic symbolism of trees leaves African Americans with a crippling knowledge of and limited relationship to trees. They can embrace their community and the trees that symbolize it once again, but must do so with caution, knowing that the leaves may conceal many forms of danger. Sethe’s partial rescue from the whitefolks’ jungle and the resulting fragmented symbolism of trees speaks to all of those living in post-slavery America where white power, privilege, and bigotry is still cultivated and exercised, however discreetly or directly. The only solution, for Denver as well as for those living in whatever form of the whitefolks’ jungle in existence today, is to “know it, and go on out the yard” (244).

Notes

1. For an extensive discussion of the history, ecology, and politics of the sacred groves of Africa, see *African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Change*, edited by Michael J. Sheridan and Celia Nyamweru.
2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “dynamic” as “of or pertaining to force producing motion: often opposed to *static*” (OED).
3. In his book, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, Michael A. Dirr writes that the American Sycamore (*Plantanus occidentalis*) commonly grows “75’ to 100’ in height with similar or greater spread” and is one of the “tallest eastern native deciduous broad-leaf trees” (755).
4. In addition to his other connections to trees, one of the plantations Sixo secretly travels to is even called “High Trees” (Morrison 59).
5. In his entry on the American Sycamore, Dirr notes the bark is “red to grey-brown and scaly near the base, exfoliating on upper trunk exposing lighter colored (white to creamy white) inner layers” (755).
6. One definition from the Oxford English Dictionary cites “aspen” as something “tremulous, quivering; quaking, timorous” (OED), and the Latin binomial for the aspen, *Populus tremula* or *Populus tremuloides*, seconds the dictionary’s definition.
7. Peach, cherry, pecan, walnut, apple, and plum trees are most often cultivated for fruit and nut production, while the dogwood and magnolia trees are often planted for ornamental purposes.
8. In his entry on the American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*), Dirr notes the tree “was once native from southern Maine to Michigan, south to Alabama and Mississippi” but that in “about 1904 a blight” spread through the entire population and left only “isolated stump[s] and root sprouts” (191).
9. Though Morrison specifically writes that “the buds of a sycamore had rained down” (245), she is most likely describing the fruit of the sycamore. While the globular fruit of the sycamore fall once they dry each year, the buds do not, and instead become leaves, flowers, or shoots in the spring.
10. Many critics note that in Sethe’s stifling maternal circle Denver becomes a whole self (Bonnet 51, Paquet and Nouvelle 123), but few acknowledge that she does so only within a community. Thus, in some way, she forfeits a piece of her identity, the stubborn and childish part perhaps, in order to function as a member of a larger group.

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