

MELUS



Morrison's Beloved: Allegorically Othering "White" Christianity

Author(s): Peggy Ochoa

Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Religion, Myth and Ritual (Summer, 1999), pp. 107-123

Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467702>

Accessed: 05/01/2010 19:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=melus>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (*MELUS*) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MELUS*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Morrison's *Beloved*: Allegorically Othering "White" Christianity

Peggy Ochoa

California State University, Fullerton

"I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

—Song of Solomon (6:3)

"I AM BELOVED and she is mine."

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

"...love is as strong as death; jealousy is as cruel as the grave;...many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it"

—Song of Solomon (8:6-7)

At least three recent critical works recognize Toni Morrison's reference to and revision of Biblical passages in her 1987 novel *Beloved*.¹ To date, however, no one has mentioned the most developed of her Scriptural allusions, namely her revisionist narration involving Old Testament texts, especially the Song of Solomon. Although Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, drew upon a Biblical passage for the title to her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, she waited for ten years to develop, in *Beloved*, the deeper implications of a reference to Solomon's Song. Allusions to this most poignant and erotic passage of the Old Testament not only inform the relationships between Morrison's characters, but also contribute to her consideration of the relationship between black and white communities in the mid-nineteenth century United States. I will argue that Morrison's allegorical revision of the Song of Solomon and other Biblical passages constitutes what Stephen A. Barney, in *Allegories of History, Allegories of Love*, terms "other-speech," a type of minority discourse related to, but not symptomatic of, the dynamics of religious and/or cultural "othering."

The dynamics of religious "othering," especially those which conflate Christianity and "the white man's burden," closely parallel and are often intertwined with what Edward Said terms "Orientalism," a process whereby powerful Western nations for centuries defined the

terms of interaction with their African and Asian colonies, and even with other non-Western nations, as a Manichean struggle between light and dark, good and bad, enlightened self and irreconcilable “other.” This “othering” process applies equally to relationships in the United States between dominant culture and those groups and individuals who have at various times been defined as other than the American ideal, an ideal historically characterized as WASP—white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.² As Said observes in *Orientalism*, “Since the White Man, like the Orientalist, lived very close to the line of tension keeping the coloreds at bay, he felt it incumbent on him readily to define and redefine the domain he surveyed” (228). In keeping with this dominating strategy, the white slaveholder “schoolteacher” in Morrison’s *Beloved* instructs his nephews to study the black slaves on the ironically named Sweet Home plantation in order to catalog their “animal” and “human” characteristics. Moreover, he severely beats Sixo, a slave who dares to challenge the slaveholder’s authority, not so much for stealing and eating a pig, but more “to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190). From Sixo’s treatment, we can see that the political power to use physical force with impunity against another person is inherently linked to the power to determine what individuals and groups get defined as “other” in the first place.

Given Sixo’s initial treatment and his ultimate death at the hands of the slaveholders, it would appear that the “other” is often, if not always, powerless in the face of those with the power to define; however, I will suggest that the very nature of “otherness,” as the term applies to both groups and the discourse of alterity, bestows hidden powers in the form of “other-speech.” The physical and psychological pain that forces marginalized persons to recognize themselves as “other,” also provides entry into a minority discourse community.³ Although minority discourse has historically been dismissed as irrelevant by those with the power to choose which narratives get published and circulated as authoritative, that very dismissal may allow an unpoliced space in which “other-speech” can develop relatively unchecked into what becomes—in effect—subversive language.

I have been using the term “other-speech” to connote minority discourse, a relatively recent formulation in literary and cultural studies; however, Barney relates it to the older literary form of allegory, noting that the “word ‘allegory,’ ‘other-speech,’ *alieniloquium*, suggests that allegories present one thing by a customary route, and another thing more deviously” (16). Applying this concept to the relationship between dominant and minority discourses, one might say that the “customary route” corresponds to the obvious meaning of a text

when read from the perspective of dominant discourse. It follows that "deviously" presented "other-speech" has the potential to offer surreptitiously the perspectives of the marginalized "other," thus creating meanings that are as carefully concealed from those who read monologically as the secret markings for a route on the underground railroad would have been. Using such an allegorical strategy, Morrison revises the terms of interaction and the identities of those involved in a basic Biblical relationship, one shared by a powerful man and a marginalized woman. An exegetical reading of *Beloved* reveals allusions to two such relationships, one between the Old Testament prophet Hosea and his adulterous, rejected wife and another between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

An exegetical reading of Morrison's novel seems almost inevitable since she chooses a New Testament reference, one which—not incidentally—involves a male speaker and a beloved female, as the epigraph to her novel: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" (Romans 9:25).⁴ In the original context of Romans, this quotation refers to God's claiming the Gentiles as part of his beloved people, a group which had historically been restricted to Jews. As Mae G. Henderson notes, in her insightful "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," the passage from Romans "repeats with little difference a passage from the Old Testament" (64). The passage to which Henderson refers but does not quote directly reads, "I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God" (Hosea 2:23). Although there appears to be little difference in the wording of the two Biblical passages, this slight difference in semantics does not diminish the immense difference in the historical relationship between Jews and Christians when the passage is read allegorically and in Biblical context. In fact, an exegetical reading of these similar verses reveals a difference so great that it has historically divided Jews and Christians over the question of which group has the right to call itself and be called by others "God's chosen people"—and thus which group constitutes a theocratically authorized Self by which to define who belongs to the "one" group and who is "Other."

That Morrison should allude to situations that have historically defined estrangement, the alienation of the Jews from Jehovah in Hosea and the New Testament record of hostilities between Christians and Jews just after the death of Christ, is exactly appropriate for the form of her novel. In fact, the very nature of allegory allows us to read various levels of sometimes hidden meaning into the division

that is the most obvious in *Beloved*, the one between American blacks and whites just before and after the Civil War. The pain and abandonment experienced by Morrison's African American characters are themselves echoes of the pain felt by the Jews as a people rejected by Jehovah and persecuted throughout the centuries by various groups of non-Jews. And, lest we forget that the dynamics of the pain of prejudice transcend cultures and generations, the rejection Morrison makes most explicit in her reference to Romans is that of the early Christians, who were hunted down and killed by both Jews and Romans. That Jews and Christians have played roles as both persecutors and persecuted, depending upon historical circumstances, underscores the constant dynamics behind the naming and mistreatment of "others" by those in power.

Recognizing the dynamics of "othering" can lead to an appreciation for the deeper levels of meaning in the allegorical relationship Morrison creates through her use of Paul's epistle to the Romans. According to another of Paul's epistles, this one to the Ephesians, God extended His offer of acceptance in the beloved to Gentiles who became Christians (1:6).⁵ Similarly, white Christian society in the mid-nineteenth century United States, of which *Beloved's* Bodwins are representatives, seemed to extend an offer of acceptance to blacks who had previously been enslaved. Therefore, in the context of the novel, those "people who were not my people," formerly "unbeloved" slaves, should be full participants in American society, just as formerly excluded Christians are promised that they are an integral part of God's beloved mentioned in Romans. In both cases, however, divisions remain despite Biblical and Constitutional exhortations to ignore differences. The antagonistic relationship between blacks and whites thus echoes the animosity between members of the early Church and Jewish zealots, such as Saul, who before his dramatic conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus, hunted down and killed Christians.

Morrison here aligns her "beloved" blacks with early Christian martyrs, while simultaneously making an analogy between the hypocrisy of the self-righteous Pharisees and that of white Christian Americans, in effect, strategically "othering" white Christianity as less than the ideal defined by Scripture. In both cases, "the beloved who was not beloved" is set in opposition to dominant ideology and must develop her own space in which to culture resistance. An effective part of that resistance is the development of "other-speech," since it does not depend upon the approval of the dominant culture, whether that hegemonic group be the Roman one that initially allowed Christian persecution or the predominantly white one in the

mid-nineteenth century United States that denied former slaves the right to participate in the governing, and defining, process of either the nation or the established Christian church.

Consequently, just as early Christians separated their religious observances from those of the Jews who refused to accept them as part of God's beloved people, freed blacks set up their own type of worship services separate from white society and the organized white Christian church. Morrison illustrates this process best in her record of the alternative black religious service which meets outside of town in a forest clearing. Significantly, the leader of this group is Baby Suggs, a black woman and Sethe's mother-in-law, who stands in sharp contrast to the powerful men who head the larger white church. Indeed, Baby Suggs is described as "an *unchurched* preacher," an intimation that she and her followers are not part of the church as it is usually envisioned (87, emphasis added). Speaking from her place on a "huge flat-sided rock," a position which might suggest that even outside of organized religion she maintains a connection to Christ, "the rock of salvation," Baby Suggs recognizes and names the hypocrisy of white Christian society and tells her black congregation "Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... You got to love it, *you!*" (88). Her words record the obvious failure of white Christianity to obey one of the Bible's most basic commandments, first recorded in the Pentateuch and later reiterated in the New Testament: "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19).

In keeping with the nature of typology, Morrison's New Testament references in *Beloved* accomplish the same goal as Paul's allusion to Hosea in his epistle to the Romans: both draw upon the dynamics of the original narrative and tap into the Judeo-Christian belief that the Bible presents a divine plan, parts of which are yet to be fulfilled. Christians, using Biblical typology, have long interpreted Old Testament stories as allegories for New Testament events. Consequently, the details of Moses's leading the Jews out of slavery in Egypt are compared to those involving Christ's delivering Christians from the slavery of sin, events which African Americans have historically interpreted as parallel to their own struggle against slavery. Drawing similar analogies between Biblical relationships and those in *Beloved*, Morrison involves her characters in situations wherein one group or representative individual has almost limitless power over an unbeloved female who attempts to circumvent the power structure in order to be united with those who can requite her love. Moreover, Morrison draws upon Biblical narratives which promise that the "unbeloved" will eventually be reunited with one who both loves her and has the power to protect her, providing the prophetic hope of

deliverance from enemies, especially at those moments in history when the position of a chosen people—whether they be persecuted Jews, Christian martyrs, or blacks trapped in slavery—seems most hopeless.

One such seemingly hopeless relationship is recorded in Hosea. Both Jews and Christians agree that the passage from Hosea echoed in *Beloved's* epigraph refers to apostate Jews who had turned to idolatry and been rejected by Jehovah, thus becoming "the people who were not my people." In the historical context of the Old Testament passage, approximately 700 years B.C., the Jews were estranged from their God after being closely identified as "His chosen people" for at least a century beforehand; the beloved had seemingly become the unbeloved, but an unbeloved who was promised that "she" would eventually receive mercy. Not only would God's people, figured as a rejected woman, receive mercy, but according to Hosea, they were promised an even closer relationship to the One who had once delivered them out of the land of Egypt: "And it shall be at that day, saith the Lord, that thou shalt call me Ishi [my husband]; and shalt call me no more Baali [my lord]" (2:16). Hosea's reference to God as a husband to a chosen, but presently unloved, people resonates in Morrison's epigraph to *Beloved*. Moreover, the novel's reference to an Old Testament deliverance figured as a marriage between a powerful husband and an unbeloved woman who becomes a beloved bride invites a reading of *Beloved* as an allegorical revision of the Song of Solomon.

Morrison develops the hope for deliverance by creating opportunities for reconciliation that parallel the eventual consummation of Solomon and his black bride, the Queen of Sheba. Although it may not be readily apparent, *Beloved's* Pauline epigraph, the situation described in Hosea, and the Song of Solomon each involves a bride. The unbeloved of Hosea is promised that "she" will call her lord "husband," the Song of Solomon refers to a beloved bride who is the object of both romantic and erotic love, and the New Testament beloved, according to Christian doctrine, refers to Christ's bride, the Church. Before we investigate the implications of Morrison's reference to a Biblical beloved in her novel, it might be useful to consider the interrelation of the Old and New Testament brides to appreciate more fully the resonances evoked by the novelist's allusions. The usual Christian interpretation of the lovers' relationship in Song of Solomon considers them to be the prophetic manifestation of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. Consequently, the Song of Solomon and the passage from Romans that introduces the novel are closely related, since the beloved of the Old Testament,

Solomon's bride, is analogous to God's chosen people in the New Testament. Solomon, according to Christian interpretation, is not only the Jewish king, but also the prophetic picture of Christ, and his beloved is not only the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, but also the picture of the beloved bride of Christ.

Although many Christian groups, both black and white, are either unaware or choose to ignore the fact that a black woman is the most prominent Biblical representation of the bride of Christ, Sondra O'Neale has traced the devaluation of the black queen in her "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators." She notes that "an early church father, Origen, points out that the black woman in the Biblical 'Song of Solomon' was a symbol of the bride of Christ" and "the Queen of Sheba." O'Neale also accurately assesses the prejudice that led to the degraded position in which Morrison's characters find themselves:

through the use of thoroughly pejorative connotations in literature and art created to accommodate the emerging slave trade, black women were presented in societal media as icons of evil rather than examples of divine beauty. [...] From the position of queen, lover, muse, and pedestaled wife, she [the black woman] became a symbol of sexual excess in the white mind. (142)

The process that O'Neale investigates appears to be an exemplary enactment of what Toni Morrison terms "American Africanism" and what Said has termed "Orientalism" in the context of postcolonial studies.⁶ More pertinently, the course of the black woman's devaluation that O'Neale traces also closely parallels the downward spiral of a beloved woman becoming the unbeloved.⁷

Given this historical and typological background, we should not be surprised that Morrison's composite characterization of the black woman, through her development of Sethe and her daughter Beloved, can be viewed as representative of both an individual bride separated from the one she loves and as a chosen group of people who were once loved, but are now rejected, and have yet to receive the full benefits of their betrothal. In a line that has received little if any critical comment, Morrison's *Beloved* is introduced first as a ghost that reminds Paul D "of that headless bride back behind Sweet Home" (13). That Beloved is described as "headless" and a "ghost" is understandable in the context of the novel, since her head was nearly detached when Sethe, to keep the child from being dragged back into slavery, killed Beloved by slitting her throat; but Beloved's description as a "headless bride" is also especially important to an allegori-

cal reading of the novel because the New Testament figures the body of Christ, the bride, as currently physically separated from its head, Christ. Although, according to Christian doctrine, Christ as the church's head in heaven is able to direct the operation of His body on earth with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Bible promises that both will be physically reunited in the future at a celestial marriage supper.⁸ In other words, those who were originally not God's people will be claimed and blessed by the one they will then call "husband." That hope, however, is yet to be fulfilled and it is the bride's time on earth as a rejected and seemingly unbeloved woman that most concerns Morrison and her readers.

Readers may remember the images of poignant longing and erotic passion as the most lasting ones from Solomon's Song; however, the bride's narrative is not one of uncomplicated bliss. If *Beloved* can be read as an allegorical revision of the Song of Solomon, as I suggest, the relationships in Morrison's novel should reflect even painful details from the Biblical passage, as indeed they do. The animosity between members of a dominant group and one who is "not beloved" constitutes the first similarity between the Song of Solomon and the racial antagonism that divides the novel's mid-nineteenth century United States. Solomon's beloved begins by saying, "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem.... Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me" (1:5-6). Implicit in the comment, "I am black, *but* comely" (emphasis added), is the attitude perpetuated by dominant ideology, both then and now, that one cannot be both black *and* beautiful, an attitude that Morrison recognizes and attempts to dispel throughout the body of her work.⁹

In the Biblical passage under consideration, it is telling that the "daughters of Jerusalem" are seemingly jealous, because this comment also captures the envy inherent in what Sigmund Freud terms the "narcissism of minor differences," the notion that there is a socially accepted ideal by which members of a culture measure themselves and others.¹⁰ Those who most closely match the ideal are deemed superior, whereas those who have even minor observable differences from the ideal fall lower on the social hierarchy of dominant culture. That such an attitude was even more pervasive in American slave society than it was in Solomon's court is made painfully obvious by Morrison both in *Beloved* and, more pointedly, in *The Bluest Eye*.

In keeping with her project of questioning the standards of beauty and the narcissistic sense of superiority bestowed upon whites by dominant ideology, Morrison draws on Solomon's Song to create a strikingly beautiful black woman in the form of Beloved. Not only does Sethe remark on Beloved's "sweetest face" (192), something a

mother would be expected to do, but Paul D and the women of the community all are impressed with Beloved's beauty. Solomon's black bride is similarly described as "beautiful" by her lover, and her friends even call her the "fairest among women" (5:9). Moreover, the physical resemblance between Morrison's Beloved and Solomon's beautiful black bride is so striking that even the aroma of each one's breath is described in similar terms. Morrison's Beloved craves sweets, especially honey (55), and her "breath was exactly like new milk" (98). Solomon says to his beloved, "Thy lips...drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue" (4:11). It seems clear that Morrison intends that her portrayal of Beloved evoke images of a Biblical counterpart, but the important question is "why?"

In creating an analogy between a former black slave, who is loved and then rejected, and the most powerful and desirable black woman mentioned in the Bible, Morrison invites us to compare the similarities and differences in their circumstances in order to understand the ahistorical dynamics of "othering" and the resultant need for the development of subversive "other-speech." The subject of her novel thus involves two issues that the novelist sees as common to the concerns of both African and African American writers: "the acknowledgement of a way of life dreamed up for us by some other people who are at the moment in power, and knowing the ways in which it can be subverted" (Davis 146). Consequently, Morrison's text not only draws on the specific narrative circumstances of Solomon's Song, which are part of dominant discourse, but it also offers the knowledge hidden in "other-speech" through its allegorical revision of the relationships between beloved—but rejected—black women and those around them.

Although Morrison allegorically revises the identities of the Old Testament lovers in *Beloved*, the pain of separation from one who is the object of overwhelming love is an integral part of both the Biblical text and the novel. The most obvious forces causing the painful separation in the Song of Solomon are the watchmen of the city. Solomon's bride laments, "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me" (5:6). These government officials wield enough power that they can even beat the king's bride with impunity, but there is a less obvious reason for the lovers' separation—the more powerful lover who could have protected the beloved has inexplicably withdrawn, causing the beloved to mourn: "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone" (5:6). As a result, in both the Biblical passage and Morrison's novel, abandoned persons are subject to degradation at the hands of a dom-

inant government power and to the initial, and perhaps even more perplexing, pain of being abandoned by one who had previously loved and protected them.

The author draws a composite picture of both types of pain in the treatment of her two most developed characters, Sethe and Beloved, each a black woman who is left defenseless by one whom she loved and whom she thought would protect her. Just as Beloved is rejected by Sethe, Sethe herself is abandoned by her husband Halle. What neither woman realizes at the time of her desolation is that her protector has been denied the right to love and protect by dominant historical forces. Halle has been murdered by the slaveholders, a fact unbeknownst to Sethe, who manages to escape on her own only to face an impossible choice. When the four horsemen—schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher, and a sheriff—find her and her children in Cincinnati, she sees only two alternatives: to allow the child she later names Beloved to be ripped from her arms and returned to slavery, a death in life, or to end the child's life mercifully and quickly, delivering her "through the veil" (163), a place that Sethe perceives as providing life even in death.

Although *Beloved's* author makes Sethe's decision and other injustices forced on black women by dominant social forces major considerations in the novel, she also concentrates on black society's failure to accept the slaves of its past. Just as Jehovah rejects the apostate Jews, as Jews reject early Christians, as white Christian society of the 1860s rejects blacks, so too does Sethe initially repel the ghost and the memory of her past as a slave. That Sethe is representative of other black women in this regard is evident in the comment that Morrison made to one interviewer in a discussion of *Beloved*:

I think Afro-Americans in rushing away from slavery, which was important to do—it meant rushing out of bondage into freedom—also rushed away from the slaves because it was painful to dwell there, and they may have abandoned some responsibilities in so doing. (Darling 4)

Morrison poignantly delineates the painful longing that results from such abandonment in the characterization of Beloved and her relationship with Sethe. Not only do the two women relate historically as Sethe, a black woman who must reclaim a painful part of her past, and Beloved, who represents that abandoned portion, but their mutual love transcends history and gender through Morrison's revision of the identities of the lovers in the Song of Solomon.

Morrison, in masterful revisionist fashion, bases her allegory on the love poem involving the black bride and her royal bridegroom, in

order to create "other-speech," thus presenting a narrative which preserves the heightened longing of the original but transfers that longing from Solomon, the white king, to a new object—Sethe, the black mother. In doing so, the author not only develops analogies to the physical characteristics and political situations of Solomon's Song, but she also draws upon the Biblical promise regarding the persistent power of love. The Biblical text reads, "Love is as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave;... Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it" (8:6-7). Morrison's novel gives flesh to these promises. Beloved's love for her mother is stronger than the grave from which she returns. Her jealousy of Sethe's affections, especially those directed toward Paul D, is as cruel as the grave. Moreover, the recurrent water imagery connected to Beloved's birth and the slave trade, in addition to the references to her being "lost in the water under the bridge" (214), can be directly related to the promise that "many waters cannot quench love." During the poetic revelation of Beloved's past, she thinks about Sethe, "her face comes through the water / a hot thing / her face is mine..." (213). When Beloved later rises from this watery domain to reclaim her mother, she embodies the truth of the Biblical promise; however, because Beloved cannot understand the historical forces that caused her mother to reject her, the daughter's love, rather than being forgiving and reconciliatory, is instead vengeful and jealous.

The same contrast between mutual love and vengeful jealousy is evident in the two most pointedly similar passages from Song of Solomon and *Beloved*. Solomon's beloved says, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). In direct contrast, Morrison's main character says, "I AM BELOVED and she is mine" (214). Whereas the feeling of being beloved is mutual in the Biblical account, Beloved's love for her mother is jealously one-sided since the daughter claims more love than Sethe, or any slave mother, is capable of giving. As Morrison's narrator points out about Beloved, in words that could apply equally to any of the forgotten slaves,

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has a claim, she is not claimed. (274)

That Beloved has a claim upon her mother which paradoxically must be but cannot be satisfied is arguably the most forceful point of the novel.

Morrison's analogies to the Song of Solomon serve to make this

claim both poignant and authoritative. Both beloveds are involved in a consuming search for that love object which they feel would make them complete and without whom they cannot live. That Morrison revises the original narrative to make the black mother instead of the white king the love object underscores the impossibility of such a quest. The black mother in the slave system can never have the power of the white king to love the beloved in return, but is instead subject to the white master who separates mother and daughter. Sethe's attempt to escape the system ironically has the same result. The mother kills her daughter so "that there was nothing there to claim" (149), when the master tries to return them to slavery; however, there is nothing left for the mother to claim either. Sethe and Beloved are separated, at least in the physical realm, and the overwhelming longing of the beloved to be claimed and joined to her mother can never be satisfied. This contingency evokes the power of undying love so evident in the Song of Solomon. Love is indeed "stronger than the grave" and "many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it" (8:6-7). Consequently, Beloved ascends from her watery grave to effect a partial reconciliation and healing which would not be possible otherwise.

The healing between mother and daughter, and between African Americans and the slaves of their pasts, is necessarily partial, not only because Beloved disappears near the end of the novel, but also because that reconciliation is still in the future allegorically. Since Christ's bride is presently "headless," Morrison's representative of that bride must also be denied the consummation she desires. Moreover, if we accept this situation as the one Morrison intended, then the two most common references to the "dearly beloved" in Christian ceremony, at weddings and at funerals, resonate simultaneously in the naming of Beloved. She is the focal point of both ceremonies—as the bride and as the departed loved one. Both Christ's bride and Morrison's Beloved are therefore analogous to Solomon's beloved black bride during the time that she is physically separated from her lover.

But the story does not end there; at the end of the Old Testament text, the lovers are reunited, a reunion that Christians interpret as analogous to Christ's return to claim his bride, the church. Since, according to Christian theology, this event has yet to take place, it is fitting that Beloved remains unclaimed at the end of the novel. In her composite rendering of the bride, however, Morrison promises that reconciliation and consummation will occur. By developing Sethe as another rejected bride, but one who is later loved both by Paul D and by the community of black women who initially reject her, the author offers hope to her rejected people that they too will experience the joy

of requited love, the kind of love that can overcome even death.

Although *Beloved* physically resembles Solomon's beloved more than Sethe does, the circumstances of Sethe's life and her time as a bride more closely parallel that of the Biblical counterpart. As young women, both Sethe and Sheba are responsible for keeping someone else's vineyard. Solomon's bride is initially "without spot" (4:7), as is the virgin Sethe, when she arrives at Sweet Home; and when Sethe and her husband Halle consummate their marriage in a cornfield, we can hear echoes of Solomon's words to his beloved: "our bed is green" (1:16). The marital relationships of the two couples also combine husbandly and brotherly love. The Old Testament bridegroom says to his bride, "Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse" (4:9), and Sethe describes Halle as "more like a brother than a husband" (25). Moreover, Sethe shares a distinguishing feature with Solomon's beloved, of whom it is written, "she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her" (6:9). Significantly, Nan, the only other surviving member of Sethe's mother's tribe on the plantation at which they are enslaved when Sethe is a child, tells Sethe that her mother "threw them all away but you" (62). Given all the corresponding details between Halle's bride and Solomon's Queen of Sheba, we should not wonder why Denver, Sethe's youngest child, should later see her mother as "a quiet, queenly woman" (12).

Denver can see her mother as quiet and queenly in post-Civil War Cincinnati, but that description does not apply to the time that Sethe spends in slavery or as the abandoned bride. Throughout most of time period covered by the novel, Sethe, like Solomon's beloved bride, is consumed with a search for her missing husband. During their separation, Sethe is savagely beaten by schoolteacher and his nephews, who even dig a hole for her abdomen so that her unborn child, the slaveholder's prospective property, will not be damaged. She had already made plans to run away with Halle before the beating, but she later laments, "He wasn't there. He wasn't where he said he would be" (68). Her situation is strikingly similar to the treatment Solomon's bride recounts: "I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. / The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me" (5:6-7). In this situation, Sethe also fits perfectly the description of "the beloved who was not beloved," representing all black women slaves who were punished for seeking a beloved who would requite their love. Sethe lives eighteen years of her life with the pain of not knowing why her husband seemingly abandoned her into the hands of those who then abused

her. Although she can never be reunited with Halle because he was killed by the slaveholders at the time of her escape, Morrison creates a replacement in the character of Paul D. Another of Sweet Home's former slaves, Paul D is that man who can finally satisfy the Biblical beloved's description of her bridegroom: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me" (7:10), fulfilling the promise of requited love that is pictured in the prophetic union of Solomon and Sheba.

On the personal level, as we have seen, Morrison develops details that are analogous to the bride's situation in the Song of Solomon to reveal the pain of an individual woman who is prevented from being reunited with the one who can and will requite her love. On the social level, the author creates a deeper, allegorical meaning in the relationship between Sethe and Paul D, a pairing which further illustrates the struggle between jealousy and love to determine the nature of social interaction. Throughout the novel, Denver's and Beloved's jealousy of their mother's attention serves to separate Paul D and Sethe just as surely as Beloved's grave and Paul's gravelike prison had previously prevented the adults' union. Moreover, the author makes it clear that it is jealousy which separates Sethe from the larger community of black women even before the death of her child does. Thus the fact that love, both personal and communal, proves strong enough at the novel's conclusion to vanquish the ghost of Beloved and the jealousy of Sethe's neighbors and daughters is significant. The author is in effect illustrating the power of love over death, the grave, and jealousy.

In contrast to white Christianity, which did not extend God's love to its black neighbors, Morrison's black characters enact a conquering love by rejecting the jealousy that divides individuals and groups. Not only does the community of black women eventually display love for one another and for their white benefactors, but they also recognize and appreciate the part that black men play in their lives. The black males in Morrison's novel are presented as both friends and attentive lovers whose desire is towards a beloved black woman. In fact, Paul D is developed as analogous to the bridegroom who not only returns to claim the abandoned bride, but who must also undergo severe pain and suffering to do so. As one of the Christ figures in *Beloved*, Paul D is buried in the gravelike box of the prison chain gang but endures the hellish punishment to be eventually resurrected as a free man. His love for the black woman, Sethe, endures the jealousy of her children and the punishments of the slave system. Indeed, by making the sufferings of Paul D parallel those of Christ, Morrison intimates the depth of the pain experienced by black men as well as the more obvious pain suffered by black women under slavery in *Beloved*.

By exhibiting a "love as strong as death," Paul D also exemplifies the power of love to reclaim the "beloved who was not beloved," Sethe as an abandoned bride. When, at the conclusion of the novel, Morrison writes of Paul D and Sethe, "He wants to put his story next to hers" (273), we can recognize that the union of their stories is representative of more than individual narratives. The author's allegorical revision of the Song of Solomon draws upon the power and dynamics of a love story that poignantly reveals the depth of painful abandonment and the height of redemptive love. Morrison, in revising the Song of Solomon, has recast that love story as "other-speech" in a space outside of dominant discourse where, as bell hooks articulates it in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions" (128). It is there in that alternative space that both lovers can say, as does Solomon's bride, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (6:3), and no white law can prohibit their mutual affirmation of the value of blackness.

Notes

1. See especially Mae G. Henderson's "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text" in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*; Susan Bowers's "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse in the *Journal of Ethnic Studies*;" and Carolyn A. Mitchell's "'I Love to Tell the Story': Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*" in *Religion and Literature*. Each of these writers concentrates on Morrison's New Testament allusions, and their few references to the Old Testament never involve the Song of Solomon.
2. Said makes the explicit connection between "Orientalism" and the similar process of "othering" within various contexts in "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," a *Critical Inquiry* article in which he asserts that "'the colonized' has since [World War II] expanded considerably to include women, subjugated and oppressed classes, national minorities, and even marginalized or incorporated academic subspecialties" (207).
3. For a detailed consideration of "minority discourse," refer to *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, edited by Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd.
4. Elizabeth B. House, in her "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved," builds on this phrase to develop convincingly the possibility that the person of Beloved is not just the embodiment of Sethe's dead child, but may also be a recently escaped slave who says that men call her "beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (*Beloved* 241). House does not, however, consider the social and religious implications of Morrison's evocation of the original Biblical text.
5. Ephesians 1:6: "...he hath made us accepted in the beloved." This and all further Biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.
6. Morrison, in her critical text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, recognizes dynamics similar to those recorded in Said's *Orientalism*

and names "American Africanism" as the process whereby African Americans are marginalized in the United States "through the simple expedient of demoting and reifying the range of color on a palette" (7).

7. That dominant ideology plays a major role in the degradation of black characters is obvious. Although several major motion pictures depicting the love story between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba have been produced over the years, the role of the queen has invariably been portrayed by white women, including Elizabeth Taylor. Only recently, in a 1994 cable television movie entitled *Solomon and Sheba*, has an African American woman, Halle Berry, been cast as Sheba—but opposite Latino Jimmy Smits as Solomon.
8. Refer to Revelation 19, especially verse 7: "...the marriage supper of the Lamb is come and his wife hath made herself ready."
9. For a detailed discussion of Morrison's treatment of blackness in relation to perceptions of beauty, refer to Denise Heinze's *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness,"* especially the chapter entitled "Beauty and Love."
10. Freud delineates the effects of the "narcissism of minor differences" in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*. For a more developed consideration of how this concept applies to negotiated subjectivity in a literary context, refer to Peggy Ochoa's "Joyce's 'Nausicaa': The Paradox of Advertising Narcissism."

Early versions of this essay benefited greatly from the informed comments of Amy Richlin and Teresa McKenna. I am also especially indebted to Vincent Cheng, Kathleen Brooks, and Harly Ramsey for their more recent readings and insightful suggestions.

Works Cited

- Barney, Stephen A. *Allegories of History, Allegories of Love*. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1979.
- Bowers, Susan. "Beloved and the New Apocalypse." *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 18 (1990): 59-77.
- Darling, Marsha. "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *The Women's Review of Books* Mar. 1988: 4.
- Davis, Christina. "Interview with Toni Morrison." *Cultural Review of the Negro World* 145 (1988): 151-56.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.
- Henderson, Mae G. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text." *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*. Ed. Hortense J. Spillers. New York: Routledge, 1991. 62-86.
- Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End P, 1992.
- House, Elizabeth B. "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved." *Studies in American Fiction* 18 (1990): 17-26.
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. and David Lloyd, eds. *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Mitchell, Carolyn A. "'I Love to Tell the Story': Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*." *Religion and Literature* 23.3 (1991): 27-42.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- _____. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

- _____. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Ochoa, Peggy. "Joyce's 'Nausicaa': The Paradox of Advertising Narcissism." *James Joyce Quarterly* 30.4/31.1 (1993): 783-93.
- O'Neale, Sondra. "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction." *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa DeLauretis. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. 139-56.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- _____. "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors." *Critical Inquiry* 15.2 (1989): 205-25.