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The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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> Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. . . . Would America have been America without her Negro people? (Du Bois 189-90)

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reconceptualizes American history. Most apparent in the novel is the historical perspective: Morrison constructs history through the acts and consciousness of African-American slaves rather than through the perspective of the dominant white social classes.[1] But historical methodology takes another vital shift in *Beloved;* history-making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author.[2]

In *Beloved,* Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process. Sethe, the central character in the novel, describes the relationship between the individual and the historical unconscious:

> "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (36)

If Sethe's individual memories exist in the world as fragments of a historical memory, then, by extension, the individual process of recollection or "rememory" can be reproduced on a historical level. Thus, Sethe's process of healing in *Beloved,* her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live.

Arnold Rampersad, in his discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk,* also describes the recovery of history as both a national and a personal necessity:

> [Du Bois's] point of view is clear. Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro-American culture in general. The normal price of the evasion of the fact of slavery is intellectual and spiritual death. Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it. (123)

In Rampersad's description, the repression of the historical past is as psychologically damaging as the repression of personal

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trauma. In *Beloved* Morrison, like Du Bois in *Souls*, negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well.[3] Both works challenge the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. And both Morrison and Du Bois delve into the stories and souls of black folk to tap the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing.

Morrison uses ritual as a model for the healing process. Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations—such as dance, song, story, and other activities—are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world. In *Beloved*, ritual processes also imply particular notions of pedagogy and epistemology in which—by way of contrast with dominant Western traditions—knowledge is multiple, context-dependent, collectively asserted, and spiritually derived. Through her assertion of the transformative power of ritual and the incorporation of rituals of healing into her narrative, Morrison invests the novel with the potential to construct and transform individual consciousness as well as social relations.

To make the novel work as a ritual, Morrison adapts techniques from Modernist novels, such as the fragmentation of the plot and a shifting narrative voice, to compel the reader to actively construct an interpretive framework. In *Beloved* the reader's process of reconstructing the fragmented story parallels Sethe's psychological recovery: Repressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed. Morrison also introduces oral narrative techniques—repetition, the blending of voices, a shifting narrative voice, and an episodic framework—that help to simulate the aural, participatory dynamics of ritual within the private, introspective form of the novel. In many oral traditions, storytelling and poetry are inseparable from ritual, since words as sounds are perceived as more than concepts; they are events with consequences. Morrison uses Modernist and oral techniques in conjunction with specifically African-American cultural referents, both historical and symbolic, to create a distinctly African-American voice and vision which, as in Baby Suggs's rituals, invoke the spiritual and imaginative power to teach and to heal.

The central ritual of healing—Sethe's "rememory" of and confrontation with her past—and the reader's ritual of healing correspond to the three sections of the novel. In part one the arrival first of Paul D then of Beloved forces Sethe to confront her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a mother. Moving from the fall of 1873 to the winter, the second part describes Sethe's period of atonement, during which she is enveloped by the past, isolated in her house with Beloved, who forces her to suffer over and over again all the pain and shame of the past. Finally, part three is Sethe's ritual "clearing," in which the women of the community aid her in casting out the voracious Beloved, and Sethe experiences a repetition of her scene of trauma with a difference—this time she aims her murderous hand at the white man who threatens her child.

The three phases of the reader's ritual also involve a personal reckoning with the history of slavery. In part one, stories of slavery are accumulated through fragmented recollections, culminating in the revelation of Sethe's murder of her child in the last chapters of the section. In part two, the reader is immersed in the voices of despair. Morrison presents the internal voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in a ritual chant of possession, while Paul D and Stamp Paid are also overwhelmed by the legacy of slav-

ery. The last part of the novel is the reader's "clearing," achieved through the comic relief of the conversation of Paul D and Stamp Paid and the hopeful reunion of Sethe and Paul D. The novel concludes with Denver's emergence as the new teacher, providing the reader with a model for a new pedagogy and the opportunity for the reconstruction of slave history from a black woman's perspective.

Finally, while *Beloved* can be read as a ritual of healing, there is also an element of disruption and unease in the novel, embodied in the character of Beloved. As an eruption of the past and the repressed unconscious, Beloved catalyzes the healing process for the characters and for the reader; thus, she is a disruption necessary for healing. But Beloved also acts as a trickster figure who defies narrative closure or categorization, foreclosing the possibility of a complete "clearing" for the reader. Thus, as the reader leaves the book, we have taken on slavery's haunt as our own.[4]

Baby Suggs and Rituals of Healing

Two ghosts impel the healing process in *Beloved*: Baby Suggs, holy, acts as a ritual guide, and Beloved, the ghost-woman, acts as a psychological catalyst for the three central (living) characters. The healing ritual in *Beloved* can be broken down into three stages. The first stage is the repression of memory that occurs from the traumas of slavery; the second stage entails a painful reconciliation with these memories; and the third is the "clearing" process, a symbolic rebirth of the sufferer. Baby Suggs provides a moral background for the first stage and a ritual model for the last. Beloved embodies the second stage, compelling the characters in her "family" to face all the pain and shame of their memories.

In *Beloved* the ritual methods of healing, of initiating the participant/reader, and of interpreting the world are represented by the lessons of Baby Suggs, whose spiritual power has earned her the appellation *holy* among her people. Baby Suggs conducts rituals outdoors in the Clearing, a place that signifies the necessity for a psychological cleansing from the past, a space to encounter painful memories safely and rest from them. The day Baby Suggs becomes free, after more than sixty years of slavery, she notices her own heartbeat and is thrilled at owning her own body for the first time. Baby Suggs then "open[s] her great heart to those who could use it" by becoming an "unchurched preacher" (87). Baby Suggs creates a ritual, out of her own heart and imagination, to heal former slaves and enable them to seek a reconciliation with their memories, whose scars survive long (even generations) after the experience of slavery has ended.

Baby Suggs's rituals in the Clearing manifest the Freudian psychoanalytic process of healing as well as a spiritual process of healing that combines African and Christian religious elements. Morrison uses Freudian psychological constructs to depict the response of slaves to their psychological torment, thus putting the construction of the African-American psyche into the most ubiquitous model of the psyche in Western literature and philosophy. According to Freud, the repression of traumatic memories directs energy away from social and sexual satisfaction to the construction of symptoms.[5] The psychoanalytic treatment involves unedited associational speech that is meant to elude the unconscious censors, transference of emotions onto the analyst, and finally an acting out or narrativizing of the trauma in order to free the diverted energy and to reintegrate (to some extent) the ego and the libido. The metaphor of "clearing" suggests the process of bringing the unconscious memories into the conscious mind, and

thus negotiating and transcending their debilitating control.

Morrison also uses African and African-American rituals to facilitate the psychological cure, suggesting that African religious ritual provides an antecedent for the psychoanalytic method and that Freudian theories are modern European derivations from longstanding ritual practices of psychic healing. The healing ritual combines Christian symbolism and African ritual expressions, as is common in the African-American church. In the spiritual context, the metaphor of "clearing" suggests a process of cleansing and rebirth.[6]

Baby Suggs is the moral and spiritual backbone of *Beloved*.

Baby Suggs's preaching and her spiritual vision invest the world with meaning without making that meaning static or rule-bound. In *Beloved*, as in all of Morrison's novels, meaning is multiple; contradictions stand intact. For example, black people and white people are essentially and irrevocably different; they are also essentially and eternally the same. Both statements are true at once, confounding the logical, objective ideology that forms the basis of Western culture.

The spiritual and subjective basis of ritual also has pedagogical implications. In ritual, the cultural specificity of knowledge and the multiple possibilities of interpretation, as well as the implied spiritual sanction, make ritual education different, at least conceptually, from the objective, scientific model of knowledge that is prevalent in American educational institutions. Baby Suggs's ritual methods of healing, teaching, and interpreting challenge basic pedagogical and epistemological premises of the United States' social system. Thus Morrison demonstrates how the reconstruction of the past makes possible a reconceptualization of the future, which is the power of history-making.

Baby Suggs is the moral and spiritual backbone of *Beloved*. Her morality is based on a method of engagement and interpretation rather than on static moral dictates. The most significant difference between Baby Suggs's version of spirituality and that of the white religions depicted in the novel is her disdain for rules and prohibitions to define morality, as well as her rejection of definitions in general. Her actions contrast with those of white men like Mr. Bodwin's father, "a deeply religious man who knew what God knew and told everybody what it was" (260).

Baby Suggs rejects the definitions of formal religions, definitions which, as the history of slavery has shown, can be easily manipulated to justify anything.[7] Baby Suggs preaches instead the guidance of a free heart and imagination:

> She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.
>
> She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (88)

Baby Suggs represents an epistemological and discursive philosophy that shapes Morrison's work, in which morality is not preset in black and white categories of good and evil; "good" or "evil" spring from the *methods* of categorizing and judging, of understanding and distributing knowledge.

The only character in *Beloved* who represents a moral absolute of evil—the unnamed "schoolteacher"—is an embodiment of the wrong *methods*. Schoolteacher, the cruel slaveholder who takes over Sweet Home after the death of the "benevolent" slaveholder, Mr. Garner, has interpretive methods that are the opposite of Baby

Suggs's. Rather than an engagement of the heart and imagination, schoolteacher's pedagogical tools are linguistic objectivity and scientific method.

His methods are shown to have devastating effects. For example, it is only when Sethe overhears schoolteacher teaching the nephews—and she is the subject of the lesson—that she fully comprehends her status as a slave. He says to the nephews, " 'I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up' " (193). Schoolteacher's educational method adopts the clarity of Manichean oppositions and scientific discourse. The notebooks and neat lines verify his definitions as facts for his students. From our cultural position we can see that these "facts" are the product of a preset organization of categories and suppositions made invisible by the use of "objective" methods. Nonetheless, the social authority of the schoolteacher and the logical clarity of his methods give his words the power of "truth."

Morrison depicts schoolteacher's pedagogical and interpretive methods as morally bereft, and through him she condemns not only slavery but also the United States' educational system. Schoolteacher's practices are basic to the institutional educational system of the United States, which may have gotten past the worst of schoolteacher's racial model, but still presents politically motivated versions of knowledge and history while masking these representations in a rhetoric of "facts" and scientific method. Through schoolteacher Morrison demonstrates that discourse, definitions, and historical methods are neither arbitrary nor objective; they are tools in a system of power relations. When Sixo, the African slave at Sweet Home, deftly talks his way out of charges of theft, Morrison writes, "... schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (190).

According to Baby Suggs's morality, good and evil are undefinable, not based on absolute knowledge; they are part of a situational ethics. " 'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop' " (87). Slavery exemplifies the connection between a lack of morality and a lack of limitations. Baby Suggs made this her last pronouncement before she died—"the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. 'They don't know when to stop,' she said" (104). The lack of limitations of the white people is shown over and over as the destruction of the slaves. The story of Halle's going mad, Sethe's murder of her baby, Paul D's memories of Mister and the bit—all demonstrate the connection to the white slaveholding society's immorality, its lack of human limitations on its actions, that reciprocates in the minds of its victims as too much suffering to be endured. In Morrison's powerful description of double consciousness, Stamp Paid thinks, "... it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them" (198).

Although Baby Suggs's dying words of despair condemn white people, Morrison makes it clear that race is not an absolute division either. Clearly within the context of American slavery, racial oppression is inseparable from social domination and abuses of power. But in *Beloved* the white "slave," Amy Denver, helps Sethe to cross the river to freedom and acts as a midwife for the birth of Denver (i.e., Sethe's daughter, who is named after Amy Denver). The similarity between the two women's situations supercedes their mutual, racially based mistrust, indicating that class relations (as well as differences in in-

herited cultural values) are central in shaping racial differences.

Because the white people don't know " 'when to stop,' " as Baby Suggs says, slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering. The overwhelming pain of the past necessitates a closing down of memory, as it does for Sethe, who "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6). But traumatic repression causes neurosis, and although Sethe's suppression of memory enables her to survive and remain sane, it also leads to a stultifying and isolated life. Paul D has a concrete image of his repression:

> He would keep the rest [of his past] where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister's comb beating in him. (72-73)

Paul D and Sethe have found it necessary to lock away their memories and their emotions as a means of surviving the extreme pains of their past. Baby Suggs understands the lack of moral limits of the white slaveholders and the limits of psychological endurance of the black slaves that make up the devastating dynamic of slavery. Baby Suggs is already dead when the novel begins, but her ritual in the Clearing is a model of the process of healing that Paul D and Sethe must undergo to free their hearts from the pain and shame of the past.

Beloved as the Trickster of History

Amy Denver tells Sethe that " 'anything dead coming back to life hurts' " (35). Beloved makes this maxim literal, as the physical manifestation of suppressed memories. Beloved is both the pain and the cure. As an embodiment of the repressed past, she acts as an unconscious imp, stealing away the volition of the characters, and as a psychoanalytic urge, she pries open suppressed memories and emotions. In a sense she is like an analyst, the object of transference and cathexis that draws out the past, while at the same time she is that past. Countering traumatic repression, she makes the characters accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved.

Beloved is the incarnation of Sethe's baby girl and of her most painful memory—the murder of her daughter to protect her children from slavery. Beloved is Sethe's "ghost," the return of her repressed past, and she forces Sethe to confront the gap between her motherlove and the realities of motherhood in slavery. But Beloved is also everyone's ghost. She functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed pasts, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in slavery, and enabling Denver to deal with her mother's history as a slave. Beloved initiates the individual healing processes of the three characters, which subsequently stimulate the formation of a family unit of love and support, in which the family members can provide for each other in ways that slavery denied them. And Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers. Beloved catalyzes Sethe's memories as the novel *Beloved* catalyzes the reader's historical memories (and according to Sethe's idea of "rememory" personal memories come to exist independently in the world and thereby become historical memories).[8]

Beloved symbolizes the past and catalyzes the future. But Beloved cannot be reduced to a symbol as she manipulates the characters with her

sweet, spiteful, and engulfing presence. The contradictions of her symbolic position, along with her enigmatic personality, her thoughts and speech filled with the fragmented and vague images of a baby as woman and the once-dead as living, make Beloved a character too complex to be catalogued and contained. Morrison succeeds in creating more in her novel than a sense of history; she makes the past haunt the present through the bewildered and bewildering character of Beloved.

Beloved also develops as a character, from a soft, voracious baby-woman to her final form as a beautiful pregnant woman. During the ritual in which she is exorcised the women see her at last:

> The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (261)

Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future, pregnant with possibilities. In her last moments, Beloved stands as a contradictory image, both as the African ancestor, the beautiful African mother, connecting the mothers and daughters of African descent to their pre-slavery heritage and power, and as the all-consuming devil-child. The spirit of the past has taken on a personality in this novel, and thus Morrison makes the writing of history a resurrection of ancestral spirits, the spirit of the long buried past. Morrison resurrects the devil-child, the spiteful, beautiful, painful past, so that Beloved—and the novel—will live on to haunt us.

To look further at the way the unfathomable and disruptive Beloved works in the novel, it is useful to turn now to a literary ancestor of Morrison's novel—the trickster tale. The trickster has long been a part of African and African-American storytelling. Most recently in African-American literary criticism, the trickster has been evoked as a deconstructive force in culture and in texts, as in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s version of the signifyin(g) monkey. Gates argues, in "The Blackness of Blackness," that the African-American rhetorical tradition has always denied the monolithic voice of the white father that white poststructuralists have only recently identified and (to varying degrees) challenged. In any case, the trickster has always been part of African-American culture, signifying on itself and on the "white masters" who "know what God knows."

One basic function of the trickster as deconstructor is to bring about role reversals in which a weaker animal or character outwits and outtalks a more powerful one—although the trickster's success is never guaranteed. In *Beloved*, Sixo, the African slave, combines this role of the trickster with the image of a heroic slave who resists slavery to his dying breath. Even his name—"Sixo"—keeps him outside the signifying system, with "a number for a name."

The trickster tales are also employed in healing processes. In his work *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine argues that "the propensity of Africans to utilize their folklore quite consciously to gain psychological release . . . needs to be reiterated if the popularity and function of animal trickster tales is to be understood" (102). Levine goes on to quote anthropologist R. S. Rattray, who concludes, "beyond a doubt, that West Africans had discovered for themselves the truth of the psychoanalysts' theory of 'repressions,' and that in these ways they sought an outlet for what might otherwise become a dangerous complex" (102).

The trickster is also the manifestation of the irrationality of life. Levine argues that, although the antebellum trickster figure often represents the slave, as the weak outwits the strong, other tricksters are best understood to represent the masters, to expose the deceit of the powerful. The trickster defies categorization as good or evil, expressing the amorality of the world. Levine writes that trickster tales "emphasize in brutal detail the irrationality and anarchy that rules Man's universe" (117).

By placing Morrison's novel in the trickster tradition we can see how her narrative strategies derive from the multiculturalism of the American novel, as well as from the African-American storytelling tradition. Beloved represents the irrationality of the world by defying definition and categorization, while at the same time participating in the novel as sister, daughter, lover, and finally, perhaps, mother. Her relations to the characters are both "real" and symbolic; her confused words and thoughts are perplexing; even her physical form is shifting and multiple. Beloved, as a trickster figure, participates in the healing function of the novel, but by refusing to be fixed by a unitary meaning she also remains unhealed—a rift in the attempt to close meaning and thereby close off the past from the present. The character Beloved, like the novel *Beloved*, works to fight a complacency toward history by both healing and disturbing the readers.

Sethe's Healing Ritual

Sethe's healing process is the focal point of the novel, as she gradually and painfully recollects the repressed past. Like Paul D's tobacco tin, Sethe's repressed past is like a rusted box closed inside of her. When she finally realizes that Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead baby, she feels as if she's found buried treasure:

> A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp as a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along. (176)

Beloved's resurrection exhumes the past Sethe has buried deep inside her. The treasure chest combines images of great discovery and wealth with images of death, the casket and the grave. As Amy Denver says, " 'Anything dead coming back to life hurts,' " and Sethe's attempts to prove her love to Beloved and gain Beloved's forgiveness nearly destroy Sethe.

Beloved is the murdered child, the repressed past, Sethe's own guilt and loss, and so Beloved can never forgive Sethe. But the former slave women understand the context within which Sethe acted; they shared in many of her miseries. And so her fellow sufferers come to her aid to exorcise the ghost of her past preying on her life, because Beloved is in some sense their ghost, too. Another local woman, Ella, had also killed her child, although it was not out of love, and when she found out about Beloved's presence "there was also something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (256).[9] Ella brings the local women to Sethe's house to banish the ghost, and their chanting summons Sethe and Beloved from the house.

The power of the women's voices joined together has a creative capacity that symbolizes and ritualizes Sethe's cycle from spiritual death to rebirth. In the chapter in which Sethe kills her baby, the imagery is from the Book of Revelations, beginning with the apoca-

lyptic image of the four horsemen and concluding with a sense of doom and judgment (148 ff.). In the exorcism ritual, near the end of the novel, the women's voices carry Sethe back to an original creative power:

> They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (259)

The women's voices carry Sethe from the apocalyptic end to a new beginning. But in contrast to the Gospel of John, which begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," the women bring Sethe to a beginning of voices without words. Just as Baby Suggs rejected religious dicta, the spiritual power of the purgation ritual lies beyond the meaning of words, in sound and sensation rather than in logical meaning and the Logos.

The exorcism of Beloved is a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleansing and rebirth, and a psychological clearing:

> 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 other women's voices, sound without words, have the power of cleansing waters, bringing Sethe back to the Clearing and to Baby Suggs's rituals during Sethe's brief period—between slavery and the return of schoolteacher—of freedom (95).

The cleansing ritual also brings Sethe back to the original scene of repression and enables her to relive it with a difference. When Denver's white employer arrives in the midst of the ritual, the confused Sethe believes him to be one of the white men who has come to take her and her children back into slavery, and Denver must hold her mother back as Sethe launches a murderous attack on the white man. As a freed woman with a group of her peers surrounding her, Sethe can act on her motherlove as she would have chosen to originally. Instead of turning on her children to save them from slavery, she turns on the white man who threatens them. The reconstruction of the scene of the trauma completes the psychological cleansing of the ritual, and exorcises Beloved from Sethe's life. Sethe can finally "lay down the sword and shield" that she has needed to fend off her memories (86).

The author and reader, too, have gone through a ritual recovery *of* history and *from* history. Sethe's ritual and her memories are Morrison's story, a story that—like the voices of the women—reaches beyond meaning to the unconscious pains of the past. Morrison's story combines the creative and cleansing power of the women's voices surrounding Sethe, as well as the spiritual power of Baby Suggs and the disturbing power of Beloved, to construct the story as a ritual both healing and painful for the reader. Finally, Sethe's daughter Denver represents both the future and the past: Denver will be the new African-American woman teacher, and she is Morrison's precursor, the woman who has taken on the task of carrying the story through the generations to our storyteller.

Denver and the History of Slavery

Denver's favorite story is the story of her birth, in which Sethe bears her into a nether world between freedom and slavery. Born on the river that divides "free" and slave land in the midst of Sethe's flight

from slavery, the dual inheritance of freedom and slavery tears Denver apart. When schoolteacher comes to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home as slaves, Denver drinks the blood of her murdered sister with her mother's milk, and she goes to jail with Sethe. A mirror image of her mother's repressed past, Denver goes deaf when she is asked about her time in prison. From then on Denver lives in seclusion, with only Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the baby ghost as companions. In her lonely withdrawal from the world, due in part to Sethe's isolation, Denver is as trapped by Sethe's past and Sethe's inability to find psychological freedom as Sethe herself is.

History for Morrison is a ritual engagement with the past.

Sethe intentionally keeps Denver in the dark: "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (42). But the unacknowledged past keeps Denver from moving into the future. She is jealous of her mother's past, and her exclusion from that past increases her loneliness and bitterness. Beloved, on the other hand, thrives on stories of the past, on pulling from Sethe details of her past, and Denver's love for Beloved forces her to confront the past she hates.

Denver's relation to the past is primarily historic rather than personal. Denver's personal stake in retrieving the past, like the reader's, involves a familial and ancestral inheritance, and her encounter with the past is "necessarily painful," just as Arnold Rampersad suggests a black American's historical encounter must be. Without knowledge of her mother's past, Denver must remain in isolation from history and from her position in the world that can only be understood through history.

As I've argued throughout this essay, history for Morrison is not an abstract factual recital; it is a ritual engagement with the past. Denver begins to experience the past through the stories she tells Beloved. When she repeats her birth story for Beloved, "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked" (78). But Denver does not fully remember her past and her mother's past until she undergoes a "ritual of mergence" in part two of the novel.

Four chapters in the middle of part two form a ritual of mergence and possession for Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. These four chapters emerge from the minds of the three characters, who are left alone after Paul D is gone. Sethe has recognized Beloved as her baby girl and is submerged in her attempt to prove her love and atone for her murder, while Denver tries to stay inside the intense circle of possession Sethe and Beloved have created. In the first three chapters, Sethe first proclaims her possession of her daughter Beloved, then Denver of her sister Beloved, then Beloved of her mother. The fourth chapter is in the form of a poetic chant, in which the memories and minds of the three combine in a mutual song of possession—"You are mine" (217). While Denver is possessed by the past she remembers everything—her own past and her mother's past, her fear of her mother as a child murderer, and her imaginary reunions with her father. The ritual of possession breaks through her isolation and grants Denver an experience of the past that can lead her into the future.

After the winter of possession, Denver decides she must leave the house to save her mother from madness and from the ravenous Beloved. In her last moment of fear as she reaches the door, Baby Suggs speaks to her. Baby's words conjure up the history of her family's struggle for sur-

vival and freedom as well as Baby Suggs's own defeat against the horrors of slavery. Denver silently asks Baby:

> But you said there was no defense.
> "There ain't."
> Then what do I do?
> "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

Although Baby Suggs gave up struggling at the end of her life, her knowledge and spirit, and the knowledge of the past, make possible Denver's emergence into the world. With understanding comes the power to endure and to change.

Denver's position parallels the reader's in her historic relation to her mother's past. But Denver also takes on another role by the end of the novel—that of the teacher, the historian, and the author. Denver will become a schoolteacher, taking up the educational task from her teacher, Lady Jones, and Baby Suggs, and taking over the tools of literacy and education from the white schoolteacher. Paul D worries when he hears of her intentions to go to college, silently cautioning her: "Watch out. Nothing in this world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (266). But this is the very reason that Denver must usurp schoolteacher's position; she must take away from him the power to define African-Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls, and their humanity.

Denver is Morrison's precursor, the historian with her roots in African-American history and culture, who has a relationship with her ancestors. Sixo chooses another course, rejecting Halle's offer to be taught English, as Denver recalls:

> One of them with a number for a name said it would change his mind—make him forget things he shouldn't and memorize things he shouldn't and he didn't want his mind messed up. But my daddy said, If you can't count they can cheat you. If you can't read they can beat you. (208)

While Halle discovers that the white man can cheat and beat you whether or not you are literate, Sixo keeps his cultural integrity and his oral tradition intact. But Denver, as a member of a different generation, must "know it and go on." With the knowledge of this cautionary tale, Denver points the way to a recovery of literacy, one that is suspicious of white definitions and discourse, and one that uses the African oral and cultural heritage and African-American values to take over the task of African-American history-making.

Conclusion: A Haunting History

In *Beloved* Morrison brings together the African-American oral and literary tradition and the Euro-American novel tradition to create a powerful and intensely personal representation of slavery in America. In this way, Morrison indirectly critiques historical and pedagogical methods prevalent in the United States. She counters a fact-based objective system with a ritual method, based in initiatory and healing rituals, in which the acquisition of knowledge is a subjective and spiritual experience. Through the conceptualization of knowledge as culturally constructed, Morrison points the way to a reconstruction of history, both national and personal, to combat the persistent intellectual and spiritual oppression of African-Americans and other Americans and bring about a freedom of the heart and imagination, as Baby Suggs dreamed.

In the last chapter of part one of *Beloved*, Sethe tries to tell Paul D about the secret she has never spoken of before—her killing of her baby girl. Throughout this chapter, as Sethe attempts to explain her past, she is described as "spinning. Round and round the room" and "turning like a slow but steady wheel" around Paul D (159); "Circling him the way she was circling the subject" (161). Like Sethe,

Morrison proceeds circuitously toward the revelation of this central secret. Morrison's circularity and indirection correspond to the process of healing undergone by Sethe, as well as to the depiction of the character of Beloved. Sethe's spinning motion around the room, around her subject, describes the necessity for approaching the unutterably painful history of slavery through oblique, fragmented, and personal glimpses of the past—that is, through means most often associated with fiction.

Beloved depicts a healing ritual, or "clearing," for Sethe, whose inability to confront her painful memories of slavery, and especially her guilt for killing her child, keeps her mentally and emotionally enslaved despite eighteen years of freedom. Morrison's fragmented revelation of Sethe's terrible act works to postpone the reader's judgment. By weaving together the complex and emotion-laden incidents and images of the past, Morrison situates Sethe's act within the historical and personal context of slavery. But Morrison's indirection also has to do with the nature of memory itself. The process of the novel corresponds to Sethe's healing ritual, in which the unspoken incident is her most repressed memory, whose recollection and recreation are essential to her recovery. The nature of repression makes this event indescribable—it is part of the inarticulate and irrational unconscious, like an inner ghost plaguing and controlling Sethe's life.

In the last chapter of part one, as Sethe moves in circles around Paul D, she comes closest to explaining the murder of her baby, but her revelation is still internal and silent. Morrison writes:

> Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

In this passage, the simple truth is not suited to a logical, causal description. The narrator describes Sethe's reaction as an emotional and physical response. The hummingbirds suggest frenzy and confusion, as well as an unnatural event, signified by their beaks thrust into Sethe's hair. The hummingbirds also represent Sethe's physical urge for flight, and at the same time the small jewel-like birds signify Sethe's children—"all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful." The repetition of the single sound—"No. No. Nono. Nonono"—contains the visceral and inarticulate reaction, the protective reaction that compels Sethe to take her children "through the veil." The veil, used by Du Bois to represent the "color-line," the division between black and white flesh and vision (16), here represents the division between life and death, as if at this moment the only escape from the threat of the white world is death.

Sethe can never explain what she did because the event is outside of the logic of words and justifications, of cause and effect. Her act was a physical and emotional reaction, the culmination of her life up to that moment.

Even her circling, repeatedly, around the subject with stories and contexts can never really reconstruct the moment, the event, that is beyond explanation. Similarly, Morrison's novel reconstructs slave history in a way that history books cannot, and in a way that cannot be appropriated by objective or scientific concepts of knowledge and history. By inscribing history as a trickster spirit, Morrison has recreated our relationship to history in a process baffling and difficult, but necessary. Through the character Beloved, Morrison denies the reader analytical explanations of slavery. Instead, the reader is led through a painful, emotional healing process, leaving him or her with a haunting sense of the depth of pain and shame suffered in slavery.

Beloved is the forgotten spirit of the past that must "be loved" even if it is unlovable and elusive. As Morrison tells us in the end, "This is not a story to pass on" (275). This line recapitulates the tension between repression and rememory figured throughout the novel. In one reading, the story is not one to pass by or to pass over. At the same time, the more evident meaning is intensely ironic—"This is not a story to pass on," and yet, as the novel shows us, it must be.

Notes

[1]There is now an extensive literary corpus of African-American perspectives on slavery in slave narratives, histories of slavery, and novels about slavery from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period, as well as literary criticism on these forms.

[2]In "*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse," Susan Bowers also relates Morrison's revision of history to African-American and African religious and philosophical concepts. In "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," Mae G. Henderson brings together historiography and psychoanalysis to argue that Sethe must learn to narrativize her story, and that in this process Sethe "tells" and reassembles (remembers) her own body as a text of black womanhood.

[3]Rampersad's quote makes it clear that this healing process has particular applications for African-American readers, but this does not deny the importance this process may have for non-African-American readers, since we must all reckon with our historical positions regarding race, class, and gender.

[4]Morrison writes, in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," that the purpose of this haunting of the reader "is to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world" (32).

[5]In the *Introductory Lectures*, Freud writes, "The distinction between nervous health and neurosis is thus reduced to a practical question and is decided by the outcome—by whether the subject is left with a sufficient amount of capacity for enjoyment and of efficiency" (568).

[6]See Levine 7-10 and 102 for a discussion of the African tradition of oral expression for psychological healing. A variety of works have been written about the trauma and psychological recovery from situations with similarities to slavery, such as torture and concentration camps. See, for example, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. See Blassingame 20-48 and 130-37 for a discussion of the compatibility and adaptations between the African and Christian religions.

[7]Many slave narratives focus on the abuse and manipulation of religious doctrine and discourse by white slaveholders who are interested in establishing "moral" arguments for the legitimacy of slavery.

[8]Beloved, in her own reminiscences, represents the most repressed aspect of slave history, the Middle Passage.

[9]Sethe was the only one of *her* mother's children that her mother did not kill, suggesting the historical rather than moral impetus of the act.

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