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Hearing Reading and Being *Read* by Beloved

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Abstract

This essay provides an analysis of not only the novel Beloved, but it also responds to an absence of significant critical discussion that attempts to make sense of Beloved as the central focus of the novel. The argument builds upon three basic concepts. First, it utilizes the concept of Reading from the black linguistic tradition to isolate when and how Beloved speaks. Second, it suggests that this act of signifyin' endows Beloved with what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "la conciencia de la mestiza." These notions of Reading and mestiza conscience/consciousness are then wedded to a specific reader response critique to suggest that Beloved represents both a past and a future historical conscience. Acting as both a memory and a premonition, Beloved raises human social consciousness and demands moral accountability. Concentrating much of its analysis on the novel's final scenes, this essay challenges the resolution that purportedly comes from Beloved's destruction. Instead, it offers the view that Beloved's demand for accountability blocks recognition of her voice, the heeding of her warning, and even an embracing of her memory.

Beloved has been discussed perhaps more than any other novel of the late twentieth century. This text has generated publications and arguments about numerous issues such as notions of community, history, the relationship between the past and the present, constructs of the body, as well as interconnections between these themes. While I find the sheer volume of *Beloved* scholarship daunting, I am still left wanting more. Haunted by what seemed an overly personal internalization of the text, I continued to teach it, read it, and read the critical commentary on it, hoping I would emerge with a more academic response to the text. What I find most problematic about the novel and the critical attention given it, is the title character herself, Beloved. My every encounter with her textual body compelled me to imaginings of her emblematic of some something for which I had no articulation. In fact, I found my inability to breach the borders of Beloved's, and indeed the text's, horizon both intriguing and baffling.

My intrigue soon turned to distress as I reflected on others' readings and responses to the novel. My torment was further exacerbated by several conversations I have had and/or eavesdropped on wherein scholars, col-

leagues, and students assert their fondness for *Beloved* ("I loved that novel"; "That is my favorite book by Toni Morrison"). Such comments have always given me pause, a discomfort I could neither name nor explain. In my third attempt to "teach" the novel, I not only reexperienced *Beloved*, but also, for the first time, encountered Beloved. A female graduate student expressed her pleasure at having read the novel: "I'm so glad we read this novel. I think Toni Morrison's writing is awesome, and this novel is wonderful. I really enjoyed it." I paused and then asked, "why exactly?" She was stunned that I would question her "love" for *Beloved*, and I was shocked that she *could* love *Beloved*. Furthermore, I wondered what that implied about Beloved. Toni Morrison skillfully articulates my feeling. In her essay "Rootedness," Morrison writes that she is disappointed by criticism of her works that does not condemn or embrace them "based on the success of their accomplishments within the culture out of which [she] writes" (1983, 342). While I am not deferring to authorial demands or ignoring her emphasis on forms of critical response, Morrison elucidates the space from which I construct this response. As an African American woman reading this narrative focused on the experiences of African American women, I hear the voice of Beloved in ways yet unspoken.¹

Perturbing though it was, the exchange with my graduate student provided me with the language to name my dis-ease: the reality of repetitive history and an awareness of how history as a narrative can be read, understood, but perhaps still its lessons not fully comprehended. Separating the medium from the message—that is, acknowledging the exquisite craft with which Morrison constructs the story while experiencing the story itself as horrific—seemed an intellectual exercise that defied my bodily and emotional sense of myself. Furthermore, I realized that I could not reconcile how *Beloved* could be so beloved when Beloved resists such affection; in fact, she vehemently articulates disaffection. It seemed to me that while Rigney claims that "Beloved's single name . . . represents a claim to freedom," it is, in fact, a wake up call, related to but more immediate than the historical slumber concerning slavery's atrocities. For me, the word of her name cannot be separated from the deeds of her character. Beloved acts from rage, for she recognizes herself as one that is not loved and cannot Be-loved. This rage is directed at Sethe, but it is also the product of the social and cultural space wherein Sethe exists.

Morrison further suggests that while black women can be "both safe harbor and ship" and not "find these places, these roles mutually exclusive," white women find such conflicts just as that, conflicts in need of resolution (Tate 1983, 122). This need for resolution manifests itself in the readings of the novel that emphasize Sethe's liberation (i.e., Rigney). To the contrary, James Phelan contemplates and complicates the ending of *Beloved* more appropriately. He argues that though the community man-

ages to “forget/repress [and] we (the readers) may forget/repress” *Beloved*, she is “not thereby erased,” for “she lives on in some way,” and once we acknowledge this existence “things will never be the same” (1993, 722). However, Phelan claims that this realization transforms the novel from a narrative representation of a historical event to “an emotionally powerful fiction” (722). Such a retreat makes *Beloved* reducible to “a function rather than a person” (Sitter 1992, 29), and as such, diminishes the provocative social critique presented in the narrative.

Instead of focusing on *Beloved* as a powerful fiction, I want to explore my response to it as a fiction about power. Before I progress to my analysis, I want to make some comments about form. I interpret *Beloved* as a novel fraught with what Barbara Christian calls “layered rhythms,” that is, an ebb and flow of the language that acts in concert with the textured meanings and layers of imagined and lived experiences that pack the text. To say *Beloved* is a complex narrative is to speak not only to its design, but also to its subject. In various ways, the complexity of its structure, the narrative that constantly folds into and onto itself, requires the reader to do the same. At critical moments, the reader is drawn into the telling of the story, implicated in the narrative itself, and called to self-reflection. Such a folding of narrative text into reader bodily text was my experience of *Beloved*/Beloved. And it is my own peculiar implication that I share here as I offer, in the form of this article, a similarly layered and textured narrative of one reader’s response to *Beloved*’s bodily and narrative text(s).

Because this article is layered and textured in meaning, I am suggesting that *Beloved* is repressed memory resurfaced and the consequence of attempts to repress and ignore painful and explosive memories. What I see in her that makes me understand the community’s compulsion to dismiss her is precisely what makes me question why she cannot be saved. So this essay does not pretend to be a linear argument. I cannot fathom how to talk about *Beloved* in the context of argumentative singularity, for she represents, to my mind, a nation lost in forgetfulness, a fear of, to paraphrase Morrison, the “response-ability” remembering, embracing recollection demands. A narrative explicating this representation must always turn to the source of itself, the explicator. Hence, at the moments when this text seems most confounding, it is those moments that I hope to return you to *Beloved*, return you to what for some readers has been a simple and direct rendering of a characterized and textual body that, in the end, maintains its unknowability. This essay is both a revelation of my desire to know her, to know her name and why she is only *called* *Beloved*, and an invitation for you to join in my journey to make her acquaintance, to hear her.

Immediately, I want to suggest that Morrison gives voice to *Beloved*, and that the body of *Beloved* becomes a talking book, not only to be read, but to *Read*—to embody, interpret, and revise textual, bodily and lived

history. There are several critical issues involved in this rendering of meaning for *Beloved*. I make sense of *Beloved* by using black discourse's distinction between reading and *Reading*. This allows me to see how *Beloved* speaks in the novel, and having found her voice, I explore its messages as I understand them. This understanding is constructed by both literary theory proper and the practical realities of my life as a black woman reader.

First, while reading implies only interpretation, *Reading* is interpretation with the addition of an underlying or implicit commentary, signifyin'. Gates tells us that signifyin' subsumes several black rhetorical tropes, including, "loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, [and] playing the dozens" (1987, 236).² Geneva Smitherman aptly extends Gates by indicating that signifyin', though a "verbal art of put down, ritualized insult," is "generally non-malicious and principled criticism" (1994, 238; emphasis added). One of the many forms signifyin' can take is *Reading*, the act of "tell[ing] someone off in no uncertain terms and in a verbally elaborate manner" (221).

Reading can often be disguised or indirect, hence it can long go unrecognized. Much like Signifying/signifyin', *Reading* is paradoxically related to reading; it is at once identical and different. The interpretation stands for something beyond uncovered "meaning." Most important here, though, is the aspect of *Reading* that involves "principled criticism," and whose goal is to "tell someone off in *no uncertain terms*." Like any ritual, though, comprehending its meaning requires that the participants first understand the context within which the ritual takes place. Because *Reading* can often be disguised by the elaborateness of its form, its message can go long unrecognized, unheard. *Beloved* is the embodiment of this ritual of "telling off." *Beloved* with its elaborate narrative form mutes *Beloved's Reading*, forces the reader to listen closely, to work hard to hear her; this hearing requires, though, a movement from the readers' safe place into the haunting space *Beloved* creates.

We read *Beloved* and can concur with Rigney's suggestion that the novel represents black insistence on an "identity that is both racial and individual" (1991, 229). We can easily agree that the novel is about black women's struggle for freedom and ownership of their bodies during and following slavery. Paraphrasing Judith Fetterley's assessment of American literature, Morrison writes in this novel about an experience that is peculiarly black and female. It is not impenetrable by Others, but it is particular just the same. In the tradition of the black talking book, we read *Beloved's* meaning through analysis of the novel's voices. That is, the voices of the novel tell their own story, but their story goes beyond the pages that contain it. They are the subjects of our critical narratives, which refashion their stories and make sense of their lives. However, to ascertain *Reading*, we need examine the voices that our critical chorus

cannot contain, the dissonant sounds that are simultaneously part of the rhythmic melody of the text, but whose pitches distract us. This subtle disharmony is interference and a textually embedded cultural critique.

Beloved directs me to the relationship between the physical body of eponymous Beloved and the textual body *Beloved*. These interactions show that, contrary to Elaine Scarry's suggestion, the body can maintain a history of pain. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry argues that pain has "a resistance to language" and as such is unspeakable, not relatable in external material reality (1985, 5). This idea mirrors critical claims made about Toni Morrison's achievement in this novel, that she "speak(s) the unspoken," or more specifically, she gives voice to the "unspeakable" (Smith 1993, 349). For Scarry, pain has no historical or cultural context against which or within which it can be articulated.³ However, a raciogendered body defies this false universal; Beloved's body represents a history of cultural pain.

The pain with which the novel is concerned is of the body politic—past, present, and future. The space of the past is inscribed on the physical bodies of Sethe and Beloved which inhabit the present. The body of Beloved portrays the future, one doomed by "futile forgetting and persistent remembrance" (Lawrence 1991, 189). Though Beloved is dis(re)membered, she resists this status and re-inserts herself into the present, forcing herself to be remembered, recalled. Her presence makes the past years of *trying* to forget her, and the circumstances that necessitate such forgetting, futile. Though "remembering seemed unwise," Beloved points out that it is unavoidable (Morrison, 274).

At this point, I am reminded of the declaration by the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* that we "whipped it all but our minds, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern is conceived" (1987, 580).⁴ Beloved recognizes the chaos that erased her life and allowed its recreation, and it is the narrative of her patterning that we read and through which she Reads. While Laura Doyle contends that Denver, Sethe's living daughter, "actively manipulates the world and the past so as to create a future," I see Beloved as a vision of a future world where the past *is* manipulated, orchestrated so that blackwomen, paraphrasing Michelle Cliff, are prohibited from (re)claiming an identity they taught [us] to despise (1985, 226).⁵ This identity is manifested in Beloved's rage, her "invisibility blues."⁶ The reality that "people who die bad don't stay in the ground," is more than a literal explanation for Beloved's presence. Beloved's physical and psychical reincarnation is necessary to remind the living that a future built upon the buried and forgotten pain of the past is never secure, will always be haunted by that past. In the future, there must always be a place for the past and the knowledge gained from it.

Beloved reminds the readers, and those she encounters in the world of

the text, that slavery, though repealed, is still with us; every dark body is haunted by it, marked by it. That is, I am always reminded of that historical period when I am referred to variously as “black,” or “African American”; these identities, labels, are a manifest struggle to name the curious result of slavery in this country. Like the scars that mark Sethe’s and Beloved’s bodies, these identity markings denote a pain of displacement and alienation, but a clear and conscientious pondering of their Readings can lead to reconciliation and healing (Horvitz 1989, 158; 165–66).

Additionally, I recall Judith Fetterley’s frame for her critical work *The Resisting Reader*. She tells us that her critical assessment of American literature is predicated upon an analysis of how American literature is related to constructs of and maintenance of male power:

Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experiences articulated, circulated, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self. (xiii)

Through this excerpt, I recognize my own powerlessness conscripted by the absence of a critical presence that speaks to my experience reading *Beloved* and the powerlessness of the character Beloved herself. The latter powerlessness is what I hope to reverse by giving attention to how Beloved’s voice is silenced in critiques that focus on Sethe. Beloved’s and my powerlessness merge and are manifested in the suggestion that Beloved cannot be sustained. Or in Fetterley’s words, to read *Beloved* as a fiction excludes Beloved from the narrative aimed at defining her. The title tells us that she is focal in the narrative, that it is her story, and the ending warns us *not* to pass on that fact, not to lose sight of her. For those readers who have comfortably read *Beloved* as a fiction, I wish this article to provoke their contemplation of how and why it is that they did/could/can.

As my invocation of Fetterley suggests, my critical approach here builds on reader response theory. However, I complicate the general notion of reader response, examining the text from the reader’s subject position—how *I* as an African American woman read *Beloved*—with Hans Georg Gadamer’s idea of “fusion of horizons” (1991, 306). In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer defines horizon as the “range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (302). This notion of individual horizons, Gadamer continues, is complicated by the act of interpretation, an event wherein the reader attempts to enter the world of the text, to understand the characters on their own terms. With a text like *Beloved*, which constructs individual as well as historical horizons, Gadamer’s ideas become especially important. That is, the

reader does not simply encounter the past in *Beloved*, but interacts with the past as the past, not in terms of present criteria. Hence, the reader must leave their world, their space, all the while allowing the space, place, and world of the text to enter the reader.⁷ It is in this conversation that understanding happens—when the world of the reader and the world of the text fuse, become intelligible to each other. I recognize the idealism of this approach, but until I met *Beloved* I saw this as an ideal impossibility.⁸

In the quest to fuse horizons, I insert my body into the typographical space that separates *Beloved Beloved*.⁹ In that white space is inscribed a dissonant and painful narrative (re)written on my body. The space where I read from and from where I am *read* by the text is so regularized in our reading consciousness, its significance and resonance are easily, if not necessarily, elided. This space represents an ordering of the world within which we live and makes our reality intelligible, communicable, our cultural and historical understandings of America. For example, in her novel *Free Enterprise*, Michelle Cliff tells the story of two blackwomen who occupy the space between text and body, the space we know as official history. But, the “official version is a cheat” (1994, 137), for it robs the text of its ability to (re)member the body’s pain, causing disruptive scars to emerge at the specific sites where (dis)remembrance hinders healing. The idea of (dis)remembrance and its consequences are the foundations of my response to Morrison’s novel. *Beloved* both relies upon our amnesia about the horrors of our national history and reminds us of the price we pay for that comfortable historical amnesia.

Contentiously, though, *Beloved* forces me to merge her physical body with the textual body and reify her pain, a pain I once resisted. I opt here to use both the personal pronoun references *me my*, as well as the collective pronouns *we* and *our* because it is through my individual—I as reader/scholar/teacher—and our—critics/readers—collective positionalities that I have come to this understanding of the text. While I read the text through myself, its message has consequences for all of us who read, comment on and teach *Beloved*. Just as *Beloved*’s presence recalls the history of her interrupted relationship with Sethe, the narrative’s manipulation of historical memory has implications for the community within which these two women live. Moreover, my reading of *Beloved* speaks to how this narrative breeches the space of its textual borders and invades public and private readers’ spaces, rendering a reading of the interrupted or deferred conversations about our historical, political, social and cultural relationships to each other, reconciling ourselves within the national community to which we all belong.

For this I interpret *Beloved* in accord with Anzaldúa’s ideas about the *mestiza*, the embodiment of difference, who brings about and embraces conflict and struggle. What I have just described as the novel’s manipulation of space, histories, and bodies correlates to Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion

of "la conciencia de las mestiza." Anzaldúa's discussion revolves around a particular racioculture and theorizes the sociopolitical and cultural happenings in the lives of those women who "cross" not only the physical border between Mexico and the United States, but also the borders between several linguistic, cultural, and racial territories. Nonetheless, I find her discussion helpful in exploring how *Beloved* addresses contemporary social psychological consciousness and conscience. Anzaldúa tells us that mestiza consciousness and/or conscience is "ideological and cultural" and leads to the development of an alien conscience. Central to this development is the establishment of "vague and undetermined places" that tell us "what is safe and unsafe, distinguish[es] us from *them*" (1987, 3). These spaces, borderlands, are inhabited by the "prohibited and the forbidden," by those "who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). The re-membered *Beloved* is a mestiza, and 124 Bluestone Road is her borderland. The notion of "crossing over" is critical to our understanding of *Beloved* as mestiza, and to our ability to hear her Reading.

Place and space are clearly demarcated within the pages of *Beloved*, but these boundaries are also violently ignored and traversed. One of the most significant of these boundaries is that of remembering, what we recall of what has passed, and (re)memory, what we choose to not recall of what we remember, the remembering that we defer, *return* to our memory banks. Though Sethe clearly remembers *Beloved*, all the while claiming to have "laid it all down," *Beloved* is not circumscribed by this memory for, "fragments of memory are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation" (hooks 1990, 147). Though Sethe recalls the events of *Beloved*'s demise, these fragmented memories do nothing to give *Beloved* back her past, or to explain why she has no present or future. Furthermore, *Beloved* shows that she is not interested in the knowledge Sethe's fragmentary recollections and discussions provide. Sethe's remembering has an other purpose, "to illuminate and transform the *present*" (hooks 1990, 147; emphasis mine). Thus, she re-members, restores body to *Beloved*, and it is through this body that we are not recounted a tale, but *Read* through a telling of fragmented history, a collective re-memory of how a holistic vision can heal.

The notion of a body in history and manifested as history seems key to experiencing *Beloved*. Encoded in her presence is the intersection between physical time, real time and constructed time, memory, and history. *Beloved* manages to contain all of these and display them simultaneously, so that through her we can see the evolution of being, an evolution of a raciogendered reality of the body in pain. This reading of *Beloved* supports Hurston's assertion that black women are indeed the mules of the world, for *Beloved* carries the burden of Sethe's past deeds

and present horrors, all the while manifesting the future that awaits them all if she is not dealt with. Her edict is one of reconciliation. There are two ways of existing in the textual and physical world of *Beloved*: you either handle your business—become involved with the reconciling of your histories—or your business *will* handle you: you will be controlled, manipulated and stifled by the hauntings of what you repress. This conception of *Beloved* as a necessary evil gives the space 124 Bluestone Road a new significance; it constructs this family place as a land of otherness.

Through narratively constructed memory, Morrison travels to the borderlands of particular historical silences and endeavors to “see what remains have been left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains *imply*” (Morrison in Samuels and Hudson-Weems 1990, 97; emphasis mine). Sethe’s peculiar utterances of/on *rememory* serve to indicate the retrieved memory, which is quite distinct from what it means to remember or remembering. To *rememory* as Sethe does is to at once forget (place back into the banks of memory) and to reconstruct (to restore particular memory of) knowledge. The borders of this *rememory* are guarded by erasures from history and subsequent myths about the nature of these omissions. *Beloved* interprets these omissions, and the implications of them enrage and frighten her. The various critical articulations on the narrative eclipse this aspect of *Beloved*’s conscience/consciousness, her narrative’s voice, and what is still left unheard, unspoken and unvoiced are the ways that *Beloved*/*Beloved Reads* us.

Beloved signifies that the healing the community hopes to achieve by destroying her is really only possible with much soul searching and conscience revisioning. Perhaps Terry Otten best captures this sentiment in his assertion that “the moral authority of *Beloved* resides . . . in the revelation of slavery’s nefarious ability to invent moral categories and behavior and to impose tragic choice” (1989, 82–83). While Otten ends here, I would add that the novel reveals the continuity of this legacy.

After Sethe murders her child, is jailed, released and returns to 124 Bluestone, this address is transformed into a place of redress from the place of refuge, solace, and spiritual peace that the presence of “Baby Suggs, holy” (Morrison 1987, 171), had come to connote. Sethe’s return and *Beloved*’s arrival turn 124 into a place of isolation inhabited by aliens. This is the conclusion yielded by taking Ella at her word. When Stamp Paid tries to identify who and from where is *Beloved*, he visits John and Ella. Ella had been a close friend to Baby Suggs, holy, and Sethe “till the rough time, till Sethe showed herself” (186–7). Now, Ella rejects Sethe and her space, indicating that she “ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (187). Her attitude represents that of most of the community surrounding 124, that Sethe and that place are taboo, alien, and dangerous. Sethe is negatively distinct from the community “us” to which Ella belongs.

The act that precipitates Sethe's rejection and alienation is an act born out of the very resistance that Paul D. and those who gather in the clearing with Baby Suggs, holy, hope to enact. Just as the clearing meetings were forbidden acts by people prohibited freedom, Sethe claimed safety through forbidden means. She "took and put [her] babies where they'd be safe," she said. But, "this here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (164). What frightens Paul D. and the others is the limit to which Sethe will go to resist the prolonging of her enslavement through time, through her progeny. When Paul D. challenges the success of her endeavors, she reminds him that though "One girl dead, [and] the other won't leave the yard . . . They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (165). When he tries to convince her that while she may view her act as a righteous one, considering the circumstances, it was perhaps a worse option than enslavement, Sethe charges that "it ain't [her] job to know what's worse. It's [her] job to know what is and to keep them away from what [she] know[s] is terrible. [She] did that" (165). Paul D.'s desire to debate the "rightness" of Sethe's actions is in many ways irrelevant to the narrative of the novel. Her circumstances cannot be evaluated in terms of right/wrong, good/evil.

In order to strive within the community of freed men and women, Sethe must "pay" for her ultimate act of resistance, by accepting her status of the feared alien other. However, attention to Beloved draws forth an other possible explanation. Beloved breathes an air of reconciliation. However, she evidences that reconciliation of past and present with a hope for the future comes after an active engagement with the anger and rage disremembrance invokes. She also intimates the necessity of conflict, and her destruction is no resolution. Though she has been destroyed, the institutions that created her, necessitated her demise, remain; they are once again buried, remembered, and disremembered. The temporary presence of Beloved, though, has made quite clear that such disremembrance is, in itself, temporary and can only lead to resurrected pain. Beloved represents the new mestiza conscience, floating as she does on the boundaries of the two worlds of life and death, past and present, and the worlds—two cultures, societies—of 124 Bluestone and the Others. In crossing the river, Beloved traverses not only the borders between life and death,¹⁰ present and past, but also the border between being and nonbeing, knowing/knowing and un-knowing (displacing or conveniently forgetting how to know)/un-known (the known that is temporarily displaced), between the normal—the dead who stay dead—and the alien.

Beloved appears at 124 without a homeland, but she is "cultured because she [has the potential to] participate in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and [her] participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols" that represent the world

which made her (Anzaldúa 1987, 81). Yet, the new culture Beloved can usher forward must first confront her anger, the rage she feels because she was denied life, defined as expendable. Like the *mestiza* with which Anzaldúa is concerned, Beloved “continually walk[s] out of one culture and into another,” and is “in all cultures at the same time” (77). The cultures here are those of Sweet Home—the culture of white possession and ownership of black bodies that denies her life—and the culture of 124 Bluestone upon her possession of it and entrance into it (re)embodied. The body of Beloved, marked by pain, intrusively introduces the former into the latter, traverses time and space. And it is her presence that makes clear that the community cannot embrace Sethe, because to do so is to remember when they were not a people to be loved. Further, when they do decide to reconcile themselves to Sethe, it is at Beloved’s expense.

Expendable, Beloved is caught between the remembered and disremembered: *alma entre dos mundos*; in a state of *nepantilism*.¹¹ She is but is not, for she is not recognized for what she is: the conscience of the community awakened, a community that has repressed its righteous rage for so long that it knows not how to contain it. The novel is Beloved’s taking inventory as Anzaldúa describes. Beloved assesses what she has inherited from Sethe, and it is a rage for resistance against her own destruction. To resist her own devouring, Beloved sustains herself on her mother, and by reattaching the umbilical cord, her lifeline, she drains Sethe. This parasitic subsistence is the baggage from her white fathers—the patriarchs who defended and protected slavery at the expense of lifeblood extracted from mothers and daughters. As testimony to Beloved’s bodily ability to reconcile the past, her method for sustaining herself is also a legacy from her darkskinned mothers, women who fight for their families’ salvation at the expense of their individual bodies. This narrative’s darkskinned mother, Sethe, sacrifices her body, corporeal and symbolic, to offer Beloved a compensatory-for-the-past tomorrow:

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that. (251)¹²

What Sethe does not recognize is that the issue is not one of reparations, but of acknowledgment. Beloved desires to be undisremembered, recalled and (re)known.

Sethe has disremembered her act of betrayal, however, and even when Beloved returns she is comforted in her disremembrance, at least for a while: “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (183). Beloved allows Sethe this complacency, being lulled by her stories. Sethe does not realize that not only is Beloved the child/deed disremembered, but she is the result of disremembrance; she is what happens when we try/learn not to remember, not to know.

Hence when we read a novel about the horrors of slavery, as many say *Beloved* is, how *can* we love it and, without pause, articulate that affection.

Through a physical placement of blackwomen's bodies into the center of this narrative, making them its axis, Toni Morrison gives me no choice but to have a personal, yet nonetheless equally academic, response to the novel. Morrison lures us to complacency with the community's choice to save Sethe from the damnable Beloved and with Paul D.'s romantic embrace of Sethe, softly reminding her that she is her own "best thing," and because they "got more yesterday than anybody [, they] need some kind of tomorrow" (273). With this projection of a life for Sethe with Paul D., a recommencing of the life interrupted by Beloved, we are given cause to celebrate Beloved's demise. However, while Paul D. can find comfort in "put[ting] his story next to [Sethe's]," we, the readers, are not afforded that luxury. Morrison encourages us to question not only Beloved's (re)destruction, but also the wholeness that supposedly comes as a result of it.¹³ As we contemplate this novel and attempt to reconcile ourselves with Sethe's future happiness and Beloved's re-erasure, we are behooved to remember the advice of Baby Suggs, holy, for Sethe as an admonition for us:

Not a house in this country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. (5)

Beloved compels us all to shake our rafters, own up to and reckon with the grief we find there. This is precisely the stubbornness that Phelan recounts in his analysis. We must re-examine what reading this novel's ending as "out of the chaos of Beloved's presence comes the order of Sethe's and a community's wholeness" indicates for and about us. Can it be that Beloved is the dead Negro whose grief crowds our rafters?

James Phelan speaks to the luxury this reading affords some, so I quote him at length. In his analysis of the novel's final passage, he writes that

Morrison continues to implicate her audience in the narrator's statements and to press her challenge about what we will do with our reading of Beloved's story. Beloved is a painful memory even for those who knew her, because she reminds everyone of the depths of pain they endured in slavery. A white reader like myself may try to escape the pain—and any responsibility—by confessing, as I just did, the limits of his understanding. But [the novel's] final passage blocks that move. In reading this narrative, we—white readers—all readers have in a sense lived with Beloved. Will we forget her because it is unwise to remember, unwise because remembering may entail some responsibility to her memory? (721)

I answer a resounding yes to both questions. Beloved surely crowds the rafters of my conscience, and Beloved, *Beloved*, demands responsibility, response-ability, not to acknowledging the grief of slavery, the grief of no

reparations for the past, but the grief of perpetuating the past through complacently placing it in the past, remembering its consequences and our resulting benefits and sufferings.

Initially, Sethe welcomes this torrential force because it allows her to “think about all [she] ain’t [have] to remember no more” (Morrison 1987, 182). Yet, Denver recognizes the threat Beloved poses to the safety of their home, created out of Sethe’s rememory. This is most clearly demonstrated when Denver “step[s] off the edge of the world” and returns with “help.” The space that Denver enters is the present sociohistorical consciousness of the United States, the space of the reader. Further, it is against this communal history, its licensed inhumanity, that Beloved situates herself and Morrison situates this novel. The scar gives us this conscientious “backdrop.” Sethe recognizes, and we the readers should recognize, the scar’s symbolism. The scar not only recalls Sethe’s “choke-cherry tree,” her moment of scarring, but it repeats, replays, and remembers the “misery” of a conscience that scars, a nation that licenses scarring. This writing upon the body of Beloved represents the writing upon the bodies of blackwomen that reads pain and sacrifice. Consciousness of our national survival is inscribed here, and how we read it is equally telling of our desire to give the(se) beloved a place in our memory, of our capacity and willingness to not only rememory, but also to remember and act on that remembrance. Beloved, through deed, exposes a negative future if we decide to seek safety in disremembrance, or in a nonpragmatic rememorying.

The nonpragmatic rememory is one that does not engage the why and how of unremembrance, only what must be disremembered. Beloved forces all with whom she is in contact to remember against memory and to act on, instead of comfortably reacting to, these remembrances. For this, she is the most threatening presence in 124.

Beloved *Reads* rememory. In fact, it is rememory, a violent rememory, that is Beloved’s scarred flesh. And in this flesh “(r)evolution works out the clash of cultures” (Anzaldúa 1987, 81). We are reminded that Beloved’s scar alters Sethe’s relationship to her and to Denver. It is the scar that marks Beloved, names her *mestiza* and identifies her—to Sethe and to us—as a citizen of borderland. She is a personality who, upon entering our space, changes us and that space significantly. Hence, what Denver sees as a devouring of her mother by Beloved, was in fact, a consensual merging of them, for as Sethe tells us, “I am Beloved and she is mine,” for which Beloved reciprocates, “I am Beloved and **she** is mine.” For Sethe and Beloved there is no separation of their selves. What happens between Sethe and Beloved epitomizes Gadamer’s fusion of horizons. That Sethe leaves behind the protective space that Paul D. wants to create for her and Denver to enter Beloved’s space allows her the opportunity to see the world as Beloved does. Sethe believes, knows, and wants to impart to

Beloved “the worse” that Paul D. spoke of. Worse than killing your child is seeing her grow up to learn “that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind” (Morrison 1987, 251). With this new vision, Sethe recognizes her place in Beloved’s narrative as she abandons her prejudices, fears, and cautions and surrenders herself to it. They are each other and belong to each other: “You are my face; you are me” (216).¹⁴ Through fusing horizons with Beloved, Sethe accepts the *mestiza*. This acceptance signals an evolution from one state of social, cultural, and political conscience/consciousness to another. Sethe hopes to redirect Beloved’s anger, away from the mother that slew her through love and toward the system that deemed her murder necessary.¹⁵ Just as Sethe and Beloved mirror each other so too does the narrative mirror the contemporary conscience of the powerless and alienated: instead of directing our anger at the institutions that restrict, we instead scapegoat alien bodies that share our restriction.

As a *mestiza*, struggling to rewrite the history of the borderland, to mark it with fluidity, Beloved can never be loved, only misknown, misshaped, and dis(re)membered. The final words of the novel reveal as much, as it also challenges our reflection on the text—the novel and Beloved:

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 claims, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away. (274)

The community destroys Beloved, presumably to save Sethe and bring the latter back into its fold. Without her consent, and possibly against her will, Sethe’s salvation erases the ambiguity and potential dis/ease of difference Beloved represents, without acknowledging Beloved’s righteous anger, without acknowledging community complicity (i.e., not warning Sethe when they knew Schoolteacher was on his way). Ella, who leads the “rescue” charge, is allowed, like the rest of the community, to rid herself of the past embodied by Beloved, the reminders of that past; she and they are allowed to exorcise their “Misery.” Beloved’s exorcism does not, as Lawrence would have us think, “open the way to a rewording of the codes that have enforced the silencing of the body’s story”; it does not “make possible a remembering of the heritage that has haunted the characters so destructively” (1991, 189). In fact, they have never not remembered; they have only failed to reconcile that remembering with the lives they now live. They have sufficed to rememory that knowledge through an excision of its embodiment. Beloved was their opportunity to reconcile the danger of not remembering the past with the necessity of forgetting. Because the community destroys her, we are left with a choice

not unlike that which led to Sethe's original sin. And, just like Sethe, we are drawn to support Beloved's erasure as only reasonable.

Beloved's excision should be disturbing to us. She is never allowed to leave the borderland, her presence is never examined; instead, she is redisremembered. This community sanctions the destruction of Beloved by its refusal to not only acknowledge and accept that Sethe had "no other choice," but also to explore why she did not. Beloved represents not only the "event" of her murder, but the why of the event, the circumstances, contexts, and practical material realities that necessitated Sethe's actions.¹⁶ Even more telling, though, is the narrative's constructing of a space of complicity for every reader. Just as the story narrated in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* tells of a spiritual space that is every where and every time, so too Beloved narrates a story that traverses the immediate boundaries of its historical and temporal setting. The narrative that Beloved reads goes beyond the immediate "history" presented in the text, and it projects itself to the present—the space from which the readers encounter the text—and the future—the results of the encounter, reader responsibility for and response-ability to critique the narrative. By accepting the challenge presented by the narrative's presentation of knowledge, a new consciousness is possible. I say possible because this consciousness can either make us all Beloved, or force a recognition of how colored bodies in the United States were never, are still not, bodies Beloved.¹⁷

The novel is about us as members of the nation state that against/through its conscience and conscious history created the space of 124 Bluestone, assigned its inhabitants, and named them unlivable. The negative associations that Beloved's extranatal sustenance from Sethe stirs in us seem to make the community's banishment and devouring of her a seemingly acceptable option. However, as a blackwoman reader, who like the *mestiza* is tolerant of "blurring, instability, struggle, contradiction and ambiguity," I cannot accept the notion of the community's salvation as either protective or viable. Horvitz quite pointedly suggests that Beloved is "every African woman whose story will never be told," but I would go further and offer her as reflective of *this* blackwoman reader whose story is listened to but not heard (1989, 157).

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Notes

1. In many ways, this article is a response to James Phelan's analysis of *Beloved's* un-understandability. He suggests, and I think rightly, that *Beloved* challenges readers' capacity to interpret her, to make sense of her character. In effect, *Beloved* is as elusive to us as she is to the characters who encounter her. Hence we, like them, attempt to disremember her by not directly addressing her as encompassing, representing, complexities in and of themselves.
2. Gates further develops his theory of Signification as it relates to African American literature in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988). I have selected his description from *Figures in Black* because of its brevity. Furthermore, my purpose in recalling Gates's idea of Signifyin/signifyin is mainly to identify the paradigm within which I situate my working notions of Reading/reading.
3. In contradiction to her own argument, however, Scarry offers evidence of diagnostic progresses that are leading to a terminology of pain, extracted by doctors' observing and recording of patients' descriptions of their pain. This suggests that pain can be constituted in language (1985, 2–4).
4. In her *Bordering on the Body*, Laura Doyle examines the ways in which *Beloved* redressed the void of blackwomen's experiences in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1994, 206–208). While I am indeed suggesting an anxious influence between these two works, it is my anxiety as captured by the juxtaposition of this moment in Ellison with my response to the text of *Beloved Beloved*.
5. I use the title of Cliff's prosaic piece, "Claiming an Identity they Taught me to Despise," included in her *The Land of Look Behind*.
6. I take this from the title of Michele Wallace's controversial work on black women and the politics of pop culture.
7. Consciously, I am using a plural pronoun reference, *their*, with a singular noun referent, *reader*. I do so to avoid gender specificity or constant repetition of the noun itself. As well, the reader here refers to me—as a reader of *Beloved*—to other readers of the novel, and to the readers of this text. In this way, the reader is theoretically pluralized though syntax suggests otherwise.
8. Gadamer also refers to the fusing of horizon in terms of readers "transposing ourselves." He says that the act of transposing comes neither from "empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person" to others' standards. It is my sense that the empathy induced by Sethe's recovery and exposure of her pain compels readers to subordinate *Beloved's* desires for acceptance and love to Sethe's earned freedom and happiness. Gadamer helps me explain why this is unsettling for me, and why we must look "beyond what is close at hand" if we intend to understand *Beloved*. My experience with this novel is captured in Gadamer's assertion that "it is only when the

attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’” (1991, 294). For more detailed discussion, see his *Truth and Method*, 271–362.

9. I recognize that the grammar of this construction is odd; *from* should be placed between the two utterances of Beloved. However, I suspend the rules of syntax here so that I may visually construct the white space I refer to, to represent in the visual the theoretical idea I examine.
10. Here I recall the verse from the Negro hymn “Take my Hand, Precious Lord”:
 When the darkness appears/ And the night draws near,/ When the day is past
 and gone/ At the river I stand, Guide my feet hold my hand/ Take my hand,
 Precious Lord and lead me home. (Dorsey 1994, 161)
 I do not suggest that Beloved is appealing to God, yet, I do want to posit that she desires Sethe to lead her home, variously 124 Bluestone and a space where she can simply exist and be loved.
11. Anzaldúa tells us that *nepantilism* is “an Aztec word meaning torn between ways,” and I use it here to characterize Beloved’s behavior and her presence in the novel.
12. See Stephanie Demetrakopolous’ “Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Individuation in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” *African American Review* 26.1(1992): 51–8.
13. For specific discussions of the idea of the historical implications of *Beloved*/ Beloved in terms of: (1) the (re)remembering of the physical, psychological and spiritual silences of slavery; (2) candid revelation of the violence of slavery; and (3) inherent criticism of subsequent renderings of that past, see Karen Baker-Fletcher’s “Fierce Love Comes to Haunt,” in *Commonweal* 6 Nov. 1987: 631–33, wherein she discusses the depth of Beloved’s/*Beloved*’s journey into our historical consciences as a nation and as readers. She poses questions about the moral and psychic dilemmas posed by the narrative. In light of the novel’s implications, Baker-Fletcher directly asserts that “whether or not Beloved *should* have been written is an ethical question in itself” (632).
14. Trudier Harris discusses what I characterize as a collapse of Sethe into Beloved and vice versa in terms of Morrison’s “making clear where ownership leaves off and possession begins,” and Harris identifies this as an inherent consequence of the “psychologically warping system called slavery.” See her “Escaping Slavery but not its Images” in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by H. L. Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad P, 1993): 330–41. See also David Lawrence’s discussion of Sethe and Beloved’s relationship as a “fusion of identity” (195–96).
15. Laura Doyle offers a compelling reading of Denver (1994, 226–229). However, she focuses on Denver’s reinstitution of herself into a mother/daughter relationship with Sethe. First Denver becomes mother, protecting Sethe from Beloved. Then she becomes Sethe’s daughter forcing Sethe to reconcile her life without Beloved, when Denver brings the world into 124. Here, though, my

focus is on Beloved and Sethe's relationship as an attempt to reunite black-women's bodies with their own histories and the history of the world they inhabit.

16. Carol Schmudder makes the observations that *Beloved* is written in the convention of "traditional" ghost stories, and as such, the house at 124 Bluestone becomes a "haunting" historical testimony to slavery and its victims. She further suggests that Beloved appears there and exposes, or forces the residents to confront, the history that the house embodies and (re)presents through them. While I agree with her that Beloved is the conscience of a past the community would rather not be conscious of, and that 124 Bluestone is as much a character in the novel as it is the setting around which the characters' and the novel's actions revolve, I resist the construct of "haunting" in the "traditional" ghost story sense as a means to explore the physical presence of the adult female Beloved. Rather, I view Beloved as a respiration woman, born with the spirit and soul of Sethe's dead child, a young woman with an old soul. I suspect that it is to this that Ella refers when she reminds Stamp Paid that "people who die bad don't stay in the ground." See Schmudder's "The Haunting of 124." *African American Review* 26.3(1992): 409–16.
17. For a detailed discussion of the use of blackwomen's bodies in the body politic of the United States and how the narratives of blackwomen's literature illuminate this utility, see "The Body Politic" in Karla Holloway's *Codes of Conduct* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995). See also Morrison's "Memory, Creation and Writing" from whence I paraphrase the notion of narrative as discourse (1984, 388).

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