



OXFORD JOURNALS  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, "Rememory," and a "Clamor for a Kiss"

Author(s): Caroline Rody

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *American Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 92-119

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/489799>

Accessed: 02/11/2012 12:42

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

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



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Literary History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, "Rememory," and a "Clamor for a Kiss"

Caroline Rody

*i am accused of tending to the past  
as if i made it,  
as if i sculpted it  
with my own hands. i did not.  
the past was waiting for me  
when i came,  
a monstrous unnamed baby,  
and i with my mother's itch  
took it to breast  
and named it  
History.  
she is more human now,  
learning language everyday,  
remembering faces, names and dates.  
when she is strong enough to travel  
on her own, beware, she will.*

Lucille Clifton, "i am accused of  
tending to the past. . . ."

*momma  
help me  
turn the face of history  
to your face.*

June Jordan, "Gettin  
Down to Get Over"

*You came right on back like a good girl,  
like a daughter. . . .*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

On the back of the New American Library edition of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, reviewer John Leonard proclaims, "I can't

imagine American literature without it." Evidently intended as consummate praise, this remark would seem to congratulate Morrison for having written into the incomplete canon of American literature the very chapter of American history it had long lacked: the story of the African Americans who survived slavery. In an important sense, *Beloved* is manifestly about the filling of historical gaps. "Sixty million and more," reads Morrison's dedication, simply, suggesting at once the numerous ancestors the novel attempts to memorialize and a vast absence its words could never fill.<sup>1</sup>

Yet how odd it is that we should now be unable to "imagine American literature" without the strange, idiosyncratic imaginative world of *Beloved*. A reading of the novel as a recuperation of unrepresented history does not begin to account for its cultivation of the bizarre and uncanny; its revival of gothic conventions—the haunted house, the bloody secret, the sexually alluring ghost; its obsessive, claustrophobic plot focus; and an emotional climate that changes from pained repression to volcanic fury to a suspended lovers' swoon. All of this seems somehow excessive to the requirements of a historical novel that would recuperate the story of African-American slavery and survival.

*Beloved* is, however, a historical novel; Morrison rewrites the life of the historical figure Margaret Garner, who killed her child to prevent her recapture into slavery, and sets this story as the focus of an epic-scale recreation of African-American life under slavery and in its aftermath.<sup>2</sup> What are we to make of the shape of this "history"? Why focus on an astonishing act of violence committed not *upon* but *by* a slave woman? Why should this slave story be central for Morrison, and why should we be brought to reimagine this chapter of American history through the prism of a haunting, passionate, violent, and ultimately unresolved relationship between a mother and daughter?

The peculiarity of this "history" suggests a design different from those described by most theories of the historical novel. Certainly Morrison's slavery novel achieves the realist portrayal of great "social trends and historical forces" that Georg Lukacs endorses, in the classic historical novels, as offering a "prehistory of the present" (34, 337). The plot of the ghost girl can also be seen to draw upon the modes of historical romance and supernatural tale, which have traditionally served to "[transform] black history into mythic fiction" (Campbell xvii). *Beloved* further suggests the influence on African-American historical fiction of magic realism, read in recent Latin American and third world fictional "histories" as a revisionary postcolonial narrative

mode, mediating the cultural and epistemological clashes of colonial history (Slemon 20–21). Yet while we can read revisionary mythification in Morrison's history, we still have not accounted for its interest in a murderous mother and ghostly daughter.

Poststructuralist critics of African-American historical fiction would have us read *Beloved* as less a mimetic or mythic recreation of the real than an entrant into ongoing historiographic discourse, inescapably about the problem of writing history in the complicated moment in which we tell the past (see Gates xi; McDowell, "Negotiating" 144–47). Though touched by the prevailing postmodern irony toward questions of truth and representation, fiction and history, *Beloved* and most contemporary novels of slavery are not "historiographic metafiction" denying the possibility of historical "Truth" (Hutcheon 109, 113). For these novels, much as for abolitionist slave narratives, the burden of communicating an authentic truth remains, and the inherited conviction of slavery's evil renders the word of fictional slaves true in a sense not solely epistemological or even political but moral. Postmodern fictions with battles still to fight, today's African-American slave "histories," though they may center upon questions of memory, knowledge, and identity, share with many ethnic, feminist, and postcolonial texts the impulse "to create an authoritative voice, not to undermine an already existing one" (Zimmerman 176). Thus Morrison calls on writers to de-emphasize the institution of slavery and put the "authority back into the hands of the slave" (qtd. in McDowell, "Negotiating" 160).

But this remark gathers irony when we return to the difficulty of interpreting *Beloved* as historical text: namely, the awesome authority Morrison puts into the hands of her slave-heroine. Surely we can read *Beloved* as a historiographic intervention, a strategic recentering of American history in the lives of the historically dispossessed. But by what logic does the plot of child murder serve any late twentieth-century ideological interest? In what sense does this plot assert the historiographic authority of an African-American woman's hands? If these theoretical approaches do not greatly illuminate the historicity of the ghost story without which our literature was incomplete, it may be because they view historical writing solely in terms of ideologies of representation, without considering the affective aspect of history writing, insofar as the historiographic project enacts a relationship of desire, an emotional implication of present and past. While *Beloved* is evidently a politically engaged novel, it is also a novel of extraordinary psychological reach. I suggest that

to account for *Beloved* we integrate an ideological reading of historical fiction with a reading of the inscribed psychological project of reimagining an inherited past.

## 1

In contemporary black “histories,” we may, indeed, have difficulty separating the political, the psychological, and the ethnic. Discussing the recent “flood” of African-American novels about slavery, Deborah McDowell muses, “Why the compulsion to repeat the massive story of slavery in the contemporary Afro-American novel? . . .” (“Negotiating” 144). This hint at a collective psychological source of the trend, if dropped somewhat playfully, probably confirms our vague sense that larger processes in African-American history and culture are at work here, that the slavery novels of our moment mark the arrival of African-American literature at a juncture of particularly profound cultural reckoning.

For the group of black writers who have attained unprecedented literary authority and audience in an era of intensifying social crisis for the African-American community, the return to the subject of slavery would seem to articulate an ironic coming-of-age. Time and success have brought black literature to a place where the vista seems to be all of memory and return. When Hazel Carby asked in the late 1980s why relatively few African-American novels had focused on slavery, it seems she merely spoke too soon (125). By 1993 the roster of such texts has grown long, and we are looking at a genre in full swing, exhibiting an astonishing diversity and range.<sup>3</sup> Today’s most celebrated black writers, engaged in the profound mythopoetic enterprise of identification with slave ancestors, return African-American literary culture to its “roots,” reviving with new dignity the foundational genre of this literature: the slave narrative (Gates xxxiii).

Following Margaret Walker’s epic *Jubilee* (1966) and gaining greatest popular notice with the phenomenon of Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976), African-American writers have undertaken a collective return to the story of slavery unimaginable in preceding decades. The reasons for the long deferral of this project are complex, but the return itself has a resonance that is unmistakable (see Campbell xiv, 112, 158; Christian 326, 330–32, 334–38; Carby 125–27). In the surge of African-American cultural production that followed the civil rights era, amidst an overriding concern with new articulations of racial identity, a moment arrived when it became possible—and, apparently, crucial—for

writers to take on the fictional persona of a slave. As nations when they rise, for good or ill, look back and reexplain to the world the past that produced their emergence in strength, so Afro-America in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s has returned to the scriptural endeavor of rewriting the texts of its own genesis.<sup>4</sup> Having attained a certain measure of power, perhaps a certain measure of safety, of distance from the slave past sufficient to risk intimacy, along with increased access to publication and a growing mainstream audience, black writers began to speak with the tongue of the ancestor, claiming their place in American culture and letters upon the same ground—in history's spiral—as that upon which the slave's voice first emerged. They thus invoke a heritage not only of suffering and resistance but also of self-definition in the face of racist ideologies of literary authority.<sup>5</sup>

A devotee of slave narratives, Morrison long anticipated their literary resurgence. As a Random House editor in 1976, Morrison told an interviewer:

You know . . . just for sustenance, I read those slave narratives—there are sometimes three or four sentences or half a page, each one of which could be developed in an art form, marvelous. Just to figure out how to—you mean to tell me she beat the dogs and the man and pulled a stump out of the ground? Who is she, you know? Who is she? It's just incredible. And all of that will surface, it *will surface*, and my *huge* joy is thinking that I am in some way part of that when I sit here in this office. . . . ("Intimate" 229)

In this remark the gender of slave narrators who most fascinate Morrison ("Who is she? . . . Who is she?") is explicit and somewhat remarkable, given that fewer than 12 percent of published slave narratives were written by women (Blassingame 83) and that the popular image of the slave has been male from abolition days to the present (see McDowell, "In the First Place"). Recent feminist scholarship on female slaves has been revising the gendering of this genre, and the large proportion of today's fictional "neoslave narratives" (Bell 289) to reimagine slavery from a black female point of view constitutes a collective symbolic reauthorization of the voice of the female slave, part of the recuperation of "herstory" ongoing in the post-1960s black women's literary "renaissance."<sup>6</sup>

Though the rise in historical novels by black writers testifies to a sociopolitical rise to the authority and the desire to represent the genesis of their people, this aura of ascent should not obscure the psychological descent, the paradoxical willingness to hit psy-

chic bottom that distinguishes today's African-American literary triumphs. The stories these novels recuperate are, after all, about deprivation and suffering often literally unspeakable. Morrison notes that slave narrators, "shaping the experience to make it palatable" for white readers, dropped a "veil" over "their interior life" ("Site" 110). Whether we view her attempt to unveil that "interior" in a novel as homage or audacity, the "anxiety of influence" operative in her retelling is shaped by a distinctive sense of interiority, an "ethnic," "familial" relationship to an inherited, traumatic story. For an African-American writer, slavery is a story known in the bones and yet not at all. "How could she bear witness to what she never lived?" asks Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (103), crystallizing the paradox of contemporary black rewritings of slavery. Writing that bears witness to an inherited tragedy approaches the past with an interest much more urgent than historical curiosity or even political revisionism. Inserting authorial consciousness into the very processes of history that accomplished the racial "othering" of the self, novels of slavery make their claims to knowledge and power face-to-face with destruction. We might think of such fictions as structures of historiographic desire, attempts to span a vast gap of time, loss, and ignorance to achieve an intimate bond, a bridge of restitution or healing, between the authorial present and the ancestral past.

Years before *Beloved* Morrison spoke of her fiction in terms of the transmission of cultural inheritance: because black people no longer live in places where parents "sit around and tell their children those . . . archetypal stories," the novel must take up the traditional "healing" function of African-American folk music and tales ("Rootedness" 340). The culture-bearing impulse generates in Morrison's novels characters of mythic stature, with tale-telling names and marked bodies,<sup>7</sup> along with the voice of a communal chorus and a narrative voice of an "oral quality" ("An Interview" 409) modeled on "a black preacher [who] requires his congregation to . . . join him in the sermon"; "not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very different kind of person but an implied 'we' in narration" ("Rootedness" 341–43).<sup>8</sup> Aspiring to a voice that sounds like "we," Morrison attempts a communal textuality: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels . . . isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything" ("Rootedness" 344). Upon finishing a book, she has said, "I feel a little lonely, as though I've lost touch . . . with some collective memory" ("Toni Morrison" 131). Writing that contacts collective memory conflates the personal and the communal, works to open the "interior life" of the individual into the "anterior life" of the people (Clemons 75), what Morrison

*In writing Beloved Morrison's Whitmanesque will to communal subjectivity confronts its antithesis and perhaps its deepest source—the catastrophic destruction of community under slavery.*

has referred to as “the life of that organism to which I belong which is black people in this country” (“Interview” 413).

In writing *Beloved* Morrison's Whitmanesque will to communal subjectivity confronts its antithesis and perhaps its deepest source—the catastrophic destruction of community under slavery. With a capacity for pain and a sustained focus on the dead unprecedented in the African-American novel, *Beloved* includes in the storytelling “we” numberless lost forebears. More than a “history,” *Beloved* serves for its author as a substitute:

There is no place here where I can go, or where you can go, and think about, or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of—slaves. . . . Something that reminds us of the ones who made the journey, and those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial—or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no three hundred foot tower. . . . And because such a place doesn't exist that *I* know of, the book had to. (Lecture)

Reconceiving the historical novel as memorial, Morrison illuminates the psychological structure of ethnic historical fiction. Like all memorials, *Beloved* is not a “place” of the dead but a place where survivors can go to “summon” and “recollect,” to look upon the sculpted shape of their own sorrow. *Beloved* cannot recover the “interior life” of slaves, but by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, it portrays that “interior” place in the African-American psyche where a slave's face still haunts.

When first conceiving her rewriting of Margaret Garner's life, Morrison has said, “It was an era I didn't want to get into—going back into and through grief” (“It's OK” 45). This “grief” seems almost a palpable atmosphere; in the personal psychological return required to write *Beloved*, it was not history Morrison had to go “back into and through” but an intensity of hovering emotion attributed neither to the ancestors nor to herself but filling the space between them. Merging the psychological, the communal, and the historical, Morrison's novel goes “back into and through” time and pain together. Returning to the surface, it brings to the present an archetypal figure for the emotional labor of its own recuperative writing: the return of a dead ancestor. I read the haunting, resurrection, and exorcism of the beloved ghost as the inscription of the writer's haunted negotiations with her people's past. Setting a metahistorical struggle between mother and ghostly daughter at the center of an epic reimagining of an entire ancestry, Morrison's history centrally dramatizes the



problem of imagining, writing, and publishing—“witnessing”—a story about her own daughterly heritage. And, as I shall argue, the ghost Beloved, who gives a body and face to that which is in excess of African-American history—the absences at that history’s core—also functions, in a dramatic reversal, as a marvelous figure for the struggle of daughterly historiographic desire itself.

## 2

In the “village” of *Beloved*, the multigenerational, culture-bearing black community of Morrison’s ideal appears in devastated form, in the persons of a few traumatized survivors, eking out an existence in the aftermath of slavery. Foregrounded in the novel, the telling of stories becomes memory’s struggle with catastrophe and loss. For Morrison’s characters, as for the novel in its contemporary moment, cultural transmission requires the retrieval of traumatic memories. This “history” thus acquires the function of communal “talking cure”: its characters, author, and readers delve into the past, repeating painful stories to work toward the health of fuller awareness.

*Beloved* opens upon the haunted house where, shunned by the neighborhood, Morrison’s heroine Sethe is raising her daughter Denver in an atmosphere of stagnant grief. Together they have come to accept what drove two sons away from home: the “spiteful” baby ghost (3) who makes herself known by clashing of pots and furniture, pools of red light by the doorway, tiny hand prints in the cake. Into this scene walks Paul D, that rare “kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (17). His arrival changes the climate of repression: he chases the invisible haunter from the house and sparks in Sethe “the temptation to trust and remember,” “to go ahead and feel” (30), for the first time in years. His past, too, has required profound repression: he has a “tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (72–73). Together, Sethe and Paul D begin a mutual talking cure that promises a mutual future. As their halting, gradual storytelling is taken up by other characters, the novel’s present unfolds entwined in multiple strands of time, voice, incident, and perspective.

Storytelling becomes the text’s self-conscious task; many scenes present a character narrating his or her life to a listener. The novel’s distinctive tone arises from the very difficulty of telling for those recovering from the traumas of slavery—witnessing the murder, torture, or sale of family and friends; being whipped, chained, led with an iron bit in the mouth, and housed in an

underground "box"; being examined and catalogued in terms of "human" and "animal" characteristics, or forcibly "nursed" by white boys when one's breasts held milk for a baby. These experiences fragment and block the memories of Morrison's ex-slaves, whose stories are revealed in bits, out of sequence, in a painful eking out and holding back often rendered in spare synecdoche: "Paul D had only begun . . . when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. . . . Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. Sethe rubbed and rubbed. . . . She hoped it calmed him as it did her. Like kneading bread . . . working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73).

As the narrative loops around events, dramatizing pain's effect on memory, it also suggests a hesitance to force the past out of characters whose memories stand in for the suffering of innumerable unknown people. Any recuperations are performed against a blank background of storylessness, symbolic of our historical knowledge of African Americans and of their representation in our literature. Morrison chooses just one family's haunted house to explicate, but as Grandma Baby Suggs says, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to the rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (5). Every American house is a haunted house. As *Beloved* revives the past in the modes of haunting, memory, and storytelling, it becomes an exercise in the poetics of absence.

Morrison's prose inventively represents the multiple shades of loss and absence known to slaves: "Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized" (23). Characters tend to gather around them clusters of the lost. "Did Patty lose her lisp?" Baby Suggs wonders about the children sold from her; "what color did Famous' skin finally take?" (139). On his postwar trek north, Paul D saw "twelve dead blacks in the first eighteen miles," and "by the time he got to Mobile, he had seen more dead people than living ones" (269). A traveling man, Paul D brings to the text a voice of tribal griot-cum-historical eyewitness: "During, before, and after the war he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food . . . stole from pigs . . . slept in trees in the day and walked by night. . . . Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies" (66). Passages like this bring to the novel cine-

matic visions of an entire struggling people, among whom Morrison names a precious few characters for detailed narration. The reader learns, like Ella as she aids escaping slaves, to listen “for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say, the questions they did not ask . . . the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind” (92). To demarcate the “holes” Morrison has characters repeat isolated remembered details, metonymies for unrecountable emotional experiences, the more poignant for their banality. Baby Suggs recalls, “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember” (5).

“That’s all you let yourself remember,” Sethe replies. In this landscape of loss it is Morrison’s pensive heroine, the “queenly woman” (12) with blood on her hands and a “tree” scarred into her back, who articulates the novel’s theory of memory and repression in a distinctive, neologistic vocabulary. To the girl who arrives at the door from nowhere and claims to have no past, Sethe says, “You disremember everything? I never knew my mother neither, but I saw her a couple of times. Did you never see yours?” (118–19). The suggestive verb “disremember” is complemented in Sethe’s usage by the idiosyncratic “rememory,” which works as both noun and verb: “I don’t ’spect you rememory this, but . . .” (160). The repetition of “rememory” underscores the text’s preoccupation with the problematics of the mind in time. Sethe explains her experience of time and “rememory”: “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. . . . Some day you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. . . . But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else . . .” (35–36). For Sethe a “rememory” (an individual experience) hangs around as a “picture” that can enter another’s “rememory” (the part of the brain that “rememories”) and complicate consciousness and identity. “Rememory” as trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present, and thus neatly conjoins the novel’s supernatural vision with its aspiration to communal epic, realizing the “collective memory” of which Morrison speaks. For while the prefix “re” (normally used for the act, not the property of consciousness) suggests that “rememory” is an active, creative mental function, Sethe’s explanation describes a natural—or a supernatural—phenomenon. For Sethe as for her author, then, to “rememory” is to use one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past.

“Rememory” thus functions in Morrison’s “history” as a

trope for the problem of reimagining one's heritage. The novel's entire poetics of memory, all of Sethe and Paul D's troubles with remembering, can be seen to figure the problem not of Morrison's own memory, of course, but of her imagination as it encounters her people's past. The characters who do not want to or can not remember their stories reverse the desire of the writer who wants to know and tell a communal history. She must work to "rememory" these ancestors who wish they could forget. In the absence of their particular faces, she must create the characters she wants to mourn. The elevation of memory to a supernatural power that connects all minds, making it possible to "bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else," is generated by authorial desire to write like a "we" about unknown ancestors. "Rememory" transforms memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power sufficient to the ethnic historical novel's claim to represent the past.

*"Rememory" transforms memory into a property of consciousness with the heightened imaginative power sufficient to the ethnic historical novel's claim to represent the past.*

Along with this heightened notion of memory, the text's inscription of the psychological project of ethnic historical recuperation relies upon heightened tropes of naming and love. Morrison's epigraph, a passage from Romans 9.25, combines these: "I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved." Suggesting that the naming function of the text be read as an offering of narrative love, the epigraph proposes a kind of history-telling that can turn estrangement into intimacy. "Beloved," Morrison names the lost past, and "Beloved" is the novel's final word. This implied function of narrative love seeks to repair the violation of love wreaked upon Morrison's characters by slavery, separation, and death. Considering newborn Denver's chances of survival, Ella tells Sethe, "If anybody was to ask me I'd say, 'Don't love nothing'" (92). Like memory, love must defend itself against history. For Paul D in the prison camp, survival meant "you protected yourself and loved small": "Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own. . . . Grass blades, salamanders. . . . Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open. . . . to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom" (162). Equating "freedom"—a consummate signifier in African-American literature and culture—with the right to love as one chooses, Morrison's text exercises its freedom to cast "long-distance love" (95) backward in time and bestow names upon—thus "freeing"—some of the African Americans history forgot. In the dialectic between the lost past and the rememorying function of narrative love, *Beloved* reconceives the historical text as a transformative space: a space in

which the present takes the past in a new and transforming embrace, constructed for mutual healing.

The transforming power of narrative is underscored in *Be-loved* by the many inset scenes of storytelling; the familial or communal contexts of these story “exchanges,” in Ross Chambers’s terms (8), dramatize the power of cultural transmission to transform family relationships.<sup>9</sup> For example, at the novel’s mythological core is the story Sethe often tells Denver of her birth under horrid conditions while her mother ran from slavery. This story—a significant feminization of the archetypal slave escape narrative—is “exchanged” in the understanding that the hardships endured by the mother should contribute to the child’s sense of self. Denver is the daughter who emerges from the storytelling a woman, embraces her community, learns to read and write, and even plans to go to college.<sup>10</sup> This storytelling exchange is a model for the intergenerational transmission of African-American oral culture; it is Denver who actually retells the escape-childbirth story in the novel. Born in a canoe on the Ohio River, between slavery and freedom, Denver the survivor and story-inheritor becomes a proto-Morrison, bearer of the family exodus saga into literate American culture.<sup>11</sup>

The storytelling transaction between Sethe and Paul D is different: the lovers engage in a mutual unburdening of the past in the hopes of a mutual healing and of a future together. “He wants to put his story next to hers,” Morrison concludes their protracted and arduous romance (273). The reconciliation of the sexes resulting from this story exchange is a particularly notable transformation, given recent controversy about the representation of black men in black women’s texts (see McDowell, “Reading”). Morrison, who has consistently written complex and nuanced black male characters (for example, Cholly Breedlove, Shadrack, Milkman Dead, Son, and Joe Trace), here creates a man whose entry into the house of fiction starts a rush not just of female tears but of female autobiography. A muse to the storytelling Sethe—or to Morrison—Paul D also offers hope of futurity at the telling’s end: “Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). The exchange between these two, developing from shared confessions to an actual romantic ending, gestures at a further transformation: the reconstitution of the black family after a time of devastation. When Paul D announces that the traumatic story has run its course and suggests its resolution in a vague futurity, his words manage the interface of this “history” and its crises with those of the present.

While most of the text’s narrative exchanges can be read in

terms of cultural transmission, the retrieval of stories to strengthen identity and community, this explanation cannot account for the tellings involving the ghost Beloved, which do not strengthen community but threaten Sethe's relationships and even her life. To understand the story transactions with Beloved—and the text's transactions with the past—we must examine the strange character at the novel's heart.

The mysterious, beautiful woman who emerges fully dressed from the stream behind Morrison's haunted house, remembering little besides crouching in the dark, longing for a certain woman's face, and crossing a bridge, turns out to be the resurrected baby Sethe murdered 18 years earlier. She wants her mother with all the intensity of an abandoned two-year-old. In this rememory of Margaret Garner and her daughter, however, the ghost comes to embody much "more," as Denver puts it (266). Morrison gives her the distinctive name everyone privately gives to their most beloved; it expresses at once the greatest anonymity and the dearest specificity. It is her name because she died still unnamed, and when Sethe heard the preacher speak the word *beloved* at her burial, she had it cut on her baby daughter's tombstone. But when the preacher said "Dearly Beloved," he must have been addressing the living assembled there and not, as the grieving Sethe thought, the dead child. "Beloved" names everyone, in the official, impersonal rhetoric of the church and names everyone who is intimately loved, but does not name the forgotten. Morrison has the name perform precisely this last function; the novel's defining conceit is to call the unnamed "beloved." Part of Beloved's strangeness derives, then, from the emotional burden she carries as a symbolic compression of innumerable forgotten people into one miraculously resurrected personality, the remembering of the "sixty million" in one youthful body.<sup>12</sup> Another part is just the weirdness of a ghost: like all the ghosts in literature, she embodies a fearful claim of the past upon the present, the past's desire to be recognized by, and even possess, the living.

Yet to write history as a ghost story, to cast the past as longing for *us*, instead of the other way around, is to inscribe a reversal of desire that informs this text's structure—and the structure of all ghost tales—on a deep level. Indeed, in imagining the longing of the murdered child for the mother, Morrison reverses the usual direction of grief, in which the living mourn the dead; the child or descendent mourns the mother or ancestor. The novel's emblematic figure of the mourning baby girl, embodying this reversal of desire, can thus function to figure both

the lost past and the mourning author—the “daughter” of this lost ancestry, desiring the face of the mother from whom time has separated her. This is to say that the historical project of the novel is in a profound sense a mother-quest, an African-American feminist “herstory” that posits a kind of “mother of history” and sends a surrogate, time-traveling daughter to enact its demonic errand of love or revenge: seeking to regain her, to heal historical separation, to know the story of the mother history forgot. Morrison spares no expense in articulating Beloved’s primal, pre-Oedipal craving for her mother’s face: “I am not separate from her . . . her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is. . . . I want to be the two of us. I want the join . . .” (210–13). Embodying an insatiable, childish, jealous desire for the absent mother’s face, to see and be seen, to commune and kiss and know and be known, Beloved is a marvelous figuration of the woman writer’s struggle with and desire for the face of the absent past, for her matrilineage, for the lost mothers she would rewrite.

In the return of Beloved, Morrison’s “rememory” of the murderer-mother thus demonstrates the psychological structure of a daughter’s desire.<sup>13</sup> “How could she do that?” Morrison wondered about Margaret Garner, and “because I could not answer that question,” she has said, “I introduced into the book one who had the right to the answer, her dead daughter” (“African-Americans”). That the dead daughter of *Beloved* functions as a surrogate self becomes startlingly clear in Morrison’s 1985 “Conversation” with Gloria Naylor on the evolution of her oeuvre. Discussing the imaginative project that impelled her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison speaks of the recovery of a “dead girl” who was a lost aspect of herself: “I remembered being a person who did belong in this earth . . . [but] there was no me in this world. And I was looking for that dead girl and I thought I might talk about that dead girl . . .” (“Conversation” 198–99). Years later, developing the psychological world of *Beloved*, Morrison imaginatively conceived the “self” as a separate entity, like “a twin or a thirst or a friend or something that sits right next to you and watches you”; “I . . . just projected her out into the earth,” she explains, “[as] the girl that Margaret Garner killed” (208).<sup>14</sup> After years of sustained creative work, Morrison concludes, “[the girl] comes running when called—walks freely around the house. . . . She is here now, alive” (217). Thus personifying her developing oeuvre as a gradually resurrected girl-self, Morrison creates an emblematic figure for the contemporary black women’s “renaissance.”<sup>15</sup>

Shaping that girl into the ghost Beloved, Morrison dramatizes the black literary daughter's imaginative return to maternal history. Though *Beloved* began as an inquiry into the motives of the mother, the energy of desire in the text is embodied in the phantom daughter, who returns through time to question the mother. And though the plot turns upon the loss of a child, this history-as-daughter's-rememory is pervaded with grief for lost mothers: Beloved's aching desire for Sethe; Sethe's mourning for Baby Suggs, the mother-in-law almost as present in memory after her death as is her ghostly granddaughter; and Sethe's loss of her own mother, remembered in excruciating fragments: a hat in the rice fields, a scar under her breast (61). This multiple mourning for mothers inscribes in our literature the tragic experience of African-American children and women under slavery, systematically denied mothers and denied the mother-right by the pitiless traffic in human labor and by enforced wet-nursing. Her mother sent to the fields, Sethe was suckled by the plantation nurse: "The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you . . ." (200). Echoing through this "history" is a cry for mother's milk, fusing a mass-scale historical deprivation with that of the thirsting self, the daughter deprived of her "disremembered" matrilineage.

The welling-up of mother-daughter longing reaches a climax at the moment when Sethe realizes Beloved is her daughter returned from death; in this moment of perfect restitution, though she holds a cup in her hand, "no milk spilled." A rush of mothers' voices is unleashed, recalling lost daughters or urging remembrance on them:

From where she sat Sethe could not examine it, not the hairline, nor the eyebrows, the lips, nor . . .

"All I remember," Baby Suggs had said, "is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Her little hands I wouldn't know em if they slapped me."

. . . the birthmark, nor the color of the gums, the shape of her ears, nor . . .

"Here. Look here. This is your ma'am. If you can't tell me by my face, look here." (175)

Set amid the echoes of so many separations, the miraculous reunion of Beloved and Sethe gathers emotional force: one child restored, one grieving mother's wish come true.<sup>16</sup>

The mother-daughter dialectic that shapes this "history"



generates intensely relational forms of identity among female characters. Morrison's women are linked by a three-generation chain of scars, marking both bond and breach: Sethe's mother urges her daughter to recognize her body in death by the scar under her breast, and Sethe's resurrected daughter bears on her neck the mark of her mother's handsaw. Between them, Sethe has "a chokecherry tree" on her back, the scar of a brutal whipping. Schoolteacher's nephews whip Sethe for reporting their first act of violence against her—the one which looms much larger in her memory: forcibly "nursing" her breast milk. The tree is thus associated with Sethe's violated motherhood, the visible sign of the crime she repeatedly laments: "they took my milk!" (17). In this novel of mother-quest, Morrison replaces the prototypical white master's crime against black slave women—rape—with a virtual rape of Sethe's motherhood.<sup>17</sup> The tree is a cruciform emblem of her suffering but also an emblem of her place in generation; as the second of three links—a "trunk" with roots and with "branches," "leaves," and "blossoms" (79)—Sethe carries the family tree on her back.<sup>18</sup> As a child, she misunderstood the pain such scars record, and when her mother said, "you can know me by this mark," Sethe replied, "but how will you know me? . . . Mark the mark on me, too" (61). Though Sethe's mother slapped her, Morrison's portrayal of the lost mothers of African-American history inscribes, indelibly, the daughter's reckless willingness to bear the mark of the mother's pain.

The mother-daughter structure also surfaces in a surprising interchangeability of generational positions among female characters. This occurs not only in the ominous passage in which *Beloved* grows into the mother and Sethe shrinks into the child (250) but also in a curious play on the word "baby," most striking in the name of the matriarch Baby Suggs. "Grandma Baby," as she is oxymoronically called in her old age, got her name from an affectionate husband; the "baby ghost" returns as an infantile young woman; and Denver too is called "baby" at the moment in her eighteenth year when she leaves her mother's house and enters the community to seek work and food for her family: "'Oh baby,' said Mrs. Jones. 'Oh, baby,'" and Denver "did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (248). The circulation of female identity through the positions "baby," "daughter," "woman," "mother," and "grandmother" links Morrison's female characters in an imaginative fusion that reflects the daughter-mother psychic dialectic of this "history," a time-transcending structure in which the novel of history meets the

poetics of motherlove: "Grown don't mean nothing to a mother," Sethe says; "they get bigger, older, but grown? . . . In my heart it don't mean a thing" (45). Thinking back like a mother, to misquote Virginia Woolf, Morrison's history adds motherlove to its repertoire of tropes for the conquest of time.<sup>19</sup>

If the ghostly daughter can figure both the return of the past and the desire of the past-questing writer, the obsessive mother-daughter dialectics of *Beloved* also make sense as a structure of literary inheritance. The search for the lost "mother" of history might be read as an agonistic struggle—or better, an ambivalent "female affiliation complex" (Gilbert and Gubar 168–71)—with the literary foremothers whose influence and whose loss to history Morrison feels so intensely ("Who is she? . . . Who is she?"): the writers of the slave narratives. Vital and impressive in their escape tales, these earliest African-American women writers represent for Morrison a culturally originary moment and a rich, barely tapped literary inheritance. Yet though their existence is foundational to Morrison's sense of authorship, as chosen antecedents they elude authorial desire, veiling in their near-anonymity much more than they reveal. These foremothers can be glimpsed today, usually, only in brief texts published under names recorded nowhere else, collected in volumes holding myriad variations on the same protean plot. In their day the slave narrators had much less literary authority than does the best-selling Morrison and even today the truth-status of their tales is debated. Still, the historical value of the narratives far surpasses that of a belated "neoslave narrative" that reimagines historical truth. Though it is Morrison's "*huge joy*" to help slave authors to "surface" in contemporary writing ("Intimate" 229), it is also her lot to view them from across a great divide and see in them the dim faces of origin she will never fully capture. In the jealous longing of the abandoned daughter, the novel figures its relationship to the unknown ancestress-muse of the African-American women's literary renaissance.<sup>20</sup>

Just as the ghost daughter's return to the mother can be read as a reversal of authorial historiographic desire, the daughter also reverses the structure of narrative seduction identified by Chambers: rather than seduce a listener, *Beloved* seduces Sethe into telling her story. Coming from the place of the dead, this ghost begs to have history told to her. The novel's normative story-exchange between mother and child, carried out by Sethe and Denver in the daylight realm of the present, transacts the inheritance of a real daughter and promises real-world continuity; the exchange between Sethe and *Beloved*, however, is sym-

bolic of the deep workings of the psyche in struggle with the past, involving guilt, longing, and fury, threatening disintegration and death. From the moment she arrives her strange appeal works on Sethe, who accepts her into the household, accepts her increasing physical intimacy, and finally recognizes her as her lost daughter. All the while, *Beloved* coaxes information from Sethe, stories she had never wanted to tell before but which now flow out of her. Toward the novel's emotional climax, Denver is excluded from the central drama, and *Beloved* has Sethe all to herself. The relationship intensifies to a frenzy; standing outside the house the old man Stamp Paid hears "a conflagration of hasty voices," among which "all he could make out was the word *mine*" (172): "[H]e kept on through the voices, and tried once more to knock on the door of 124. This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring" (181).

In this mother-daughter struggle Stamp hears the concentrated agony of the entire people.<sup>21</sup> The reunion of Sethe and *Beloved* crystallizes the vast problem of facing and reclaiming African-American history in a terrible mother-daughter seduction-struggle for the story. Morrison's desire to represent Margaret Garner and her generation and to write a story that could lie "next to hers," so to speak, generates the bodily form of a ghostly child who floats through time, finds the mother for whom she longs, wins her embrace, and nearly strangles her to death. The mother's murder of her daughter, the daughter's resurrection, and all the novel's gothic horror seem excessive to history in the sense of an objective "prehistory of the present" because they illustrate quite a different sense of history: the subjective, ethnic possession of history understood as the prehistory of the self. Encountering the story of Margaret Garner, Morrison could not get it out of her mind, and her return to embrace this impossible mother-figure in fiction suggests the impossibility and the urgency of embracing one's inheritance of such a history, one's living relationship to so much death. In a moment when a black woman writer at last possesses the authority to take her history into her own hands, Morrison risks—and confirms—that authority with the figure of a fearsome foremother, thereby revealing a daughter's vulnerability to her history, its haunting, violent grip on the mind, the dangerous pull of love that draws her back. If our literature was incomplete without *Beloved*, it was because we had not been told the story of slavery by a writer willing to undertake the life-and-death story of the surviving self.

## 3

We can read in the obsessive relationship at the center of this text the figuration of authorial desire/grief for a lost mother-of-history, the active principle in Morrison's reimagining of her ancestral community. Our account is incomplete, however, without attention to the implications of the gendering and sexuality of the ghost: Beloved's haunting is a metaphoric return of the past in the form of an excess of female desire. Figuring the disremembered past as "the girl who waited to be loved" (274), Morrison conflates the problematics of time, loss, and representation with a drama of inconsumable female desire. Calling the past "Beloved" and re-membering it in a female body, the text gives one name to the lost of history and buried female desire, and it stages the simultaneous resurrection of both.

When the lost past returns in *Beloved*, it demonstrates a startling sexuality. Susan Willis has argued that Morrison tends to figure history, particularly "the loss of history and culture" resulting from the African-American northern and urban migrations in "sexual terms"; sexuality erupts in her novels to evoke earlier, more vital modes of black life (35). When the bourgeois black women in *The Bluest Eye* maintain vigilance against "eruptions of funk" (68), Willis claims, "funk" signifies "the intrusion of the past in the present" (41). The "funk" in Morrison's earlier novels suggests, then, a distinctively black female sexuality inseparable from a sense of historical continuity. Yet the ghost Beloved is an eruption of powerful, physical female desire that radically threatens the distinction between past and present as well as the household and the throats of the living. The disruptive sexuality of a murdered girl returned from the dead is a funky nightmare, an agony of limitless sexual desire expressive of the lot of the disremembered in time.

Strikingly, this ghostly longing does not restrict its objects by gender. Beloved seduces Paul D but cannot "take her eyes off Sethe": "Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindlin, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. . . . she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded . . . with desire. Sethe stirred and looked . . . into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless" (57-58). When one day Beloved's massaging strokes turn to "lips that kept on kissing," Sethe startles, saying, "You too old for that" (97-98). If this moment can be explained as just the cognitive clash produced by the returned baby-ghost plot, a central section of the book is even more substantially homoerotic in content and structure.

When Sethe discovers Beloved's identity, she interprets her

reappearance as a sign of forgiveness, and in immense relief she turns her back on the world and devotes herself to loving Beloved. The novel then embarks upon 18 pages of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (199) by Sethe and her two daughters, now an isolated and passionate trio, who, having locked the door, enter a communion of love, outside time. Echoing the *Song of Songs*, each speaks a monologue in turn: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine”; “Beloved is my sister”; “I am Beloved and she is mine” (200–10). Their voices then join in a fugue of woman-woman love: “You are my sister / You are my daughter / You are my face; you are me”; “I have your milk / I have your smile / I will take care of you”; “You are mine / You are mine / You are mine” (216–17).

In this fantasy of fulfilled female desire, the text seems to find its heart. When Beloved’s “lesbian” desire first disrupts Sethe’s household, it is one with the volcanic return of the repressed past she brings with her, out of the closet, as it were, and into the house of the present. But when Sethe locks her house against the world—in particular the male world of Stamp Paid and Paul D—lesbian desire is no longer disturbing; rather, the *jouissant* communion that ensues seems a momentary utopian resolution of the war between present and past. If the fluctuations of sexuality in Morrison can be seen to encode historical process, this “lesbian” section of *Beloved* might constitute a momentary “separatist” resolution of historical tensions, in a realm “free at last,” as Morrison suggestively puts it (199), of male interpretation or authority—free, in fact, of history. But if, as I have argued, Beloved figures both the lost past and the desiring present, her desire for Sethe suggests a “matrisexual” narrative desire.<sup>22</sup> The seduction of the ancestress for her story, which Beloved undertakes for Morrison, here rests in an ahistorical, pre-Oedipal fantasy that unites “mother” and “child” as lovers. As the form joins their separate voices in ritualized call and response, female historiographic agon is, for a moment, perfectly resolved.<sup>23</sup>

The perfect, timeless moment passes, however; Sethe has left her job, and when the food runs out, Denver goes into the world to find some and begins to bring her haunted family back into its community and into time. At home the love-feast has passed the satiation point; Beloved demands more and more from Sethe, while accusing her of desertion. Slowly she begins to grow bigger, while Sethe diminishes, so that it seems to Denver that “the thing was done”: “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child. . . . Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it. . . . And the older woman yielded it

up without a murmur" (250). The murdered baby turned lesbian ghost has become a vampire. A difficult emotional crossing is made when the text acknowledges that the murdered innocent, the forgotten past, can become, if allowed to return and take over our present-day households, a killer. When the women of the town hear that Sethe's murdered baby has returned, they overcome their longtime disgust and decide that "nobody got that coming" (256). Thirty-strong, they march to the house and perform a collective exorcism; *Beloved* vanishes. Paul D then returns to bring Sethe out of a traumatic withdrawal, and into "some kind of tomorrow."

Having shaken the fictional present of Sethe's life free of the burden of its past, Morrison ends her story. She then closes the text with a two-page coda that leaves Sethe's living family behind and meditates only on *Beloved* and her meaning for our present moment. There is a recognition here that, like the ghost-vampire of Sethe's past, writing, too, can feed on the historical mother, grow larger than her, potentially kill her; and "when you kill the ancestor," Morrison has said, "you kill yourself" ("Rootedness" 344). Taking leave of history, the novel leaves the slave mother to her own moment, to herself—whoever she was. When she reads a slave woman's narrative, Morrison wonders, "Who is she? . . . Who is she?" But at her slave novel's end, she lets the foremother question herself: "Me? Me?" Sethe asks, her story's final words and her reply when Paul D tells her "You your best thing, Sethe" (273). *Beloved* ultimately leaves the mother of history to possess herself, stops haunting her with the losses of the past or with our present longing.

Yet the text does not give up *Beloved*. She is a possession rescued from the past, a mirror-image of the daughter who searches backwards in time. In the final two pages Morrison diminishes *Beloved*'s body once again to a haunting, carrying the losses of history as "a loneliness" that we banish from thought as we banish denied desire (274). Having told history as the painful re-remembering of the forgotten, *Beloved* ends by "witnessing" the process of dis(re)memberment, as "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 coda depicts human collusion with passing time—the general hunger to reabsorb and repress loss that afflicts the storytelling village: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her. . . . They forgot her like a bad dream. . . . Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more famil-

iar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't . . ." (274–75).

The meditations of this prose-poem, "transfiguring and disseminating the haunting" (Lecture), bring history to an unclosed closure and the haunt to our own houses. Morrison seems to unravel the illusion of historical mimesis created in the preceding fiction and to describe the text's history-telling as the inverse of cultural transmission, the shadowy underside of family inheritance, a romance with the painfully reanimated body of loss. The text repeats three times in closing that this is "not a story to pass on," a statement best read not as a warning against repetition but as a description by negation. *Beloved* is not a story of presence and continuity but one that delineates the place of absence: "By and by all trace is gone. . . . The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss. *Beloved*" (275). Speaking in negatives, Morrison makes absence exquisitely tangible; the lost past is "not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for" but "just weather"; the lovely nonsubstance "just weather" rolls away before the stunning silence, "certainly no clamor for a kiss." For us of course, closing the book, there is nothing but weather. The past does not exist unless we choose to hear its clamor. Morrison stages an encounter with the past in a drama of such clamorous desire that she does make us seem to hear loss clamor back. And in ending, having once again hushed the obscure absences and denied desires that her fiction aroused, she seals our relationship to the lost past with the offering of a name: "*Beloved*." Thus her history achieves its embrace.

### Notes

1. Morrison explains the "sixty million" as "the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery—those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (Clemons 75).
2. For Margaret Garner's story see Harris, which reprints an 1856 newspaper account of the incident (10). Morrison first encountered the story when working on Harris's book as an editor at Random House. For a fuller account of Garner's story, see Lerner 60–63.
3. Carby examines Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936) and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and mentions Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). To this list we might add

Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), and new novels of Caribbean slavery, including Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* (1992) and Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1992).

4. The historical novel as genre tends to be intimately connected to group identity, to a group's development of the authority or cultural need to represent its history. The connection between historical fiction and nationalism is central, for example, to Lukacs's reading of Walter Scott (30–63). Notably, the rise of black women to historiographic authority follows the post-civil rights and women's movement booms in black and women's literatures and leads the surge in new feminist historical texts across the spectrum of ethnic and postcolonial women's literatures.

5. The original slave narrative, Gates argues, "represents the attempts of blacks to *write themselves into being*" (xxiii), though ex-slaves generally could publish only with extensive supporting documentation by whites, testifying to their authorship, their literacy and their very existence.

6. Particularly important to recent feminist scholarship has been the authentication by Yellin of Harriet Jacobs's previously discredited narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. See also Braxton.

7. Such characters include Pilate, First Corinthians, and Milkman in *Song of Solomon*; Sula, Eva Peace, and the three Deweys in *Sula*; and besides the ghost Beloved herself, Baby Suggs, Sethe, Stamp Paid, and the three Pauls in *Beloved*.

8. A communal chorus can be heard in the grieving women at Chicken Little's funeral in *Sula*, the various female spirits in *Tar Baby*, and the exorcising women in *Beloved*. An imaginative conflation of "I" and "we," self and community, recurs in Morrison's recorded remarks. "When I view the world, perceive it and write about it," she told Claudia Tate, "it's the world of black people" ("Toni Morrison" 118). "I write for black women," she said to Sandi Russell; "we are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do" ("It's OK" 46). To Tate again, "My audience is always the people in the book I'm writing at the time. I don't think of an extended audience." And in the same interview, "I wrote *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were the books I wanted to read. No one had written them yet, so I wrote them" (122). For Morrison, evidently, writing activates communion—among readers, other writers, a community, an ancestry, fictional characters, and the self.

9. Chambers argues that narrative is always a transaction based on "an initial *contract*, an understanding between the participants in the exchange as to the purposes served by the narrative function, its 'point'" (8). The "point" of a given narrative is suggested internally by "specific indications of the narrative situation appropriate to it," such as an inset seduction of a listener, an exchange with the power to "change relationships" (4, 9).

10. Denver's character inhabits less the folkloric and more the realist narrative world. Unlike Sethe, *Beloved*, and other Morrison women, she has no emblem-



atic scar. Yet Sethe calls her a “charmed child” (41); her character figures African-American survival, the unlegendary descendants who have put the memory of such as Beloved behind them. Standing in for the reader as belated receiver of the story of slavery, Denver is sometimes alienated and annoyed: “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it?” (13), and often tormented by a story-inheritor’s mixed emotions: “She loved it because it was all about herself; but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it” (77). And like her author, Denver cannot know, but only “rememory” her family’s stories: she tells her birth story to Beloved “seeing it . . . and feeling how it must have felt to her mother”; together “the two did the best they could to create what really happened” (78).

11. Notably, Denver also brings the family story into dialogue with whites. Named for the white girl Amy Denver, who assists at her birth, Denver has a white “mother” along with her black one. A white female teacher who prepares her for Oberlin seals Denver’s connection to white culture. The role of white female characters in the birth and nurturance of this fictional daughter seems to cast white women in a supporting relationship to the fictional project itself. Further, the dramatic encounter of Sethe and Amy in the American wilderness, bonding over the archetypal female experiences of giving birth and fleeing male violence, can be read as a female reimagination of the Huck-and-Jim interracial duos of American fiction and popular culture. With a name that suggests the Wild West and a quest for Boston, Amy evokes a continent of nineteenth-century white American female existence, interestingly represented as earthy and independent, bucking the tide by leaving home, moving eastward, and aiding a slave woman on the run. In the light of Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), which also represents a relationship between a pregnant, escaping slave woman and a sympathetic white woman, we might trace the formation of a significant myth of American female interracial bonding.

12. Beloved’s monologue (210–14) suggests that she recalls the Middle Passage, that she carries a vast ancestral memory, and thus is the ghost of many more than one lost soul.

13. This assertion does not contradict Hirsch’s claim that in *Beloved* Morrison tells the mother’s story and thus “[opens] the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction” (198) or Liscio’s related claim that in *Beloved* Morrison is “Writing Mother’s Milk.” Rather, I would argue, *Beloved* turns the “daughterly” feminist plot, in Hirsch’s terms, into a project of daughterly return to the mother. Recuperating both the (historical) mother’s story and “the black mother-infant daughter bond” (Liscio 39), *Beloved* aims to reunite the daughter’s and the mother’s voices in dialogue.

14. Describing this precursor of Beloved, the dead girl brought back to the world, as a figure for her imaginative work, Morrison uses what would become the language of the coda to *Beloved* (in reverse form): writing *The Bluest Eye* Morrison began the process of “bit by bit . . . rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention,” recovering “[h]er fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time,” so that “[s]he is here now, alive” (“Conversation” 217). The coda to *Beloved*, by contrast, fragments and dissolves the dead girl back into “time and inattention.”

15. Morrison's description of the "dead girl" is remarkably like her descriptions of the new "renaissance" generation of black women writers (see "Conversation" 217; "Interview" 418). Indeed, the fantastic figure of a reborn, resurrected, time-traveling, or otherwise magical black daughter that now proliferates in African-American women's historical fictions seems the embodied "spirit" of the black women's "renaissance." The recurrent plot of the marvelous time-traveling daughter who returns to the mother-of-history is an allegory of the desire—and the newly acquired literary authority—to reimagine the genesis of the black female self, that is, of the power of black feminist re-imagination. I elaborate this argument in a work in progress, tentatively entitled "The Daughter's Return: Revisions of History in Contemporary African-American and Caribbean Women's Fiction."

16. Locating history in a mother-daughter relationship and foregrounding scenes of childbirth and nursing, Morrison joins many contemporary women writers of female-centered historical fictions in recovering childbirth as the site of history-in-the-making. Childbirth becomes the definitive female trope for historical origins and normative, healthy inheritance in recent women's fiction. But if history is an ordinary woman giving birth, distortions of the normal birth plot reflect the impact of bad history on ordinary women. Scenes of childbirth-gone-wrong—occurring in strange or dangerous circumstances, resulting in the death of mother or child or in their subsequent separation—become emblematic of historical trauma. In the slave mother's murder of her daughter, Morrison gives us a female image for demonic history. Finally, in scenes of mother-daughter reunion, Morrison and others figure their own work of daughterly historical return, of recuperation of the mother-of-history.

17. *Beloved* in effect rewrites black wet-nursing as institutionalized rape. When her daughter is restored to her, Sethe's remarks fuse the resentment of a wet nurse and a rape survivor: "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby" (200).

18. All three scars form crosses, for the mother has "a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" (61), and *Beloved* has a horizontal line across her neck; the inheritance of slavery is, allegorically, these women's cross to bear.

19. Motherlove in *Beloved* is a force stronger than death: "For a baby," Denver says of the ghost, "she throws a powerful spell" "No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe replies (4), asserting later in her monologue, "Beloved, she my daughter. . . . my love was tough and she back now." Beyond the grave powerful foremothers hold sway: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is," Sethe says of her attempt to kill her children and herself, and when *Beloved* returns she thinks, "I bet you Baby Suggs, on the other side, helped" (200–03).

20. In reviving the slave mother figure, Morrison reproduces neither the titillating rape scenes predominant in the portraits of slave women in men's narratives (see Foster) nor the archetypal "outraged mother" described by Braxton. Though the pregnant Sethe prepares to devour an assailant, and though she gives birth when nearly dead herself, and rages against the theft of her milk, when she kills her child the archetype is shattered. Morrison's willingness to create heroines who break the rules for "positive" representation of the race

(see McDowell, “‘The Self and the Other’”; Spillers) here produces the absolute antitype of the good black mother and of the good daughter while insisting on our sympathy for both. *Beloved's* ambiguous treatment of the slave woman creates a certain alienation effect; the experience of sympathizing with the slave mother who kills her child may cause readers to feel (as many of my students have felt) that they have begun to realize the full horror of slavery for the first time.

21. Rigney persuasively reads this conflagration of voices as an evocation of “the mother tongue,” “a semiotic jungle in which language itself defies convention and the laws of logic,” and more specifically, “a black woman's jungle” (17–18).

22. Chodorow uses this term to describe the original sexuality of children (95).

23. A “lesbian” reading of *Beloved* would probably be rejected by Morrison, who has denied she wrote a lesbian novel in *Sula*, insisting it depicts the close female friendship historically characteristic of black women (“It's OK” 45). Certainly the many strong, close female bonds in Morrison's novels—particularly the recurring three-woman households—strike us as affirmations of women's love and culture, and of a feminist aesthetic, without necessarily implying lesbianism. But it is interesting that after rejecting such readings of *Sula* Morrison would write a novel that lends itself even more to reading as a “lesbian” text. Morrison's figuration of human relationships tends to blur all the “kinds” of love, the distinctions between emotions, as when Sethe, upon realizing her daughter has returned to her, “ascended the lily-white stairs like a bride” (176) or when, speaking “unspoken” thoughts to *Beloved*, she says that Paul D “found out about me and you in the shed” (202–03), and unwittingly connects motherly murder to clandestine lovemaking. “Love is or it ain't,” Sethe tells Paul D (164). Clearly female homoerotics remains a vital element in Morrison's vocabulary of interchangeable tropes for love.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987.
- Blassingame, John. “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems.” Davis and Gates 78–98.
- Braxton, Joanne M. “Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Re-definition of the Slave Narrative Genre.” *Massachusetts Review* 27 (1986): 379–87.
- Campbell, Jane. *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1986.
- Carby, Hazel V. “Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery.” McDowell and Rampersad 125–43.
- Chambers, Ross. *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.
- Christian, Barbara. “Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something:

- African-American Women's Historical Novels." *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. Ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1990. 326-41.
- Clemons, Walter. "A Gravestone of Memories." *Newsweek* 28 Sept. 1989: 74-75.
- Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Foster, Frances. "'In Respect to Females . . .': Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators." *Black American Literature Forum* 15 (1981): 66-70.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Language of Slavery." Davis and Gates xi-xxxiv.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The War of the Words*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. Vol. 1 of *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. 3 vols. 1988-94.
- Harris, Middleton A. *The Black Book*. New York: Random, 1974.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. 1975. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Lerner, Gerda, ed. *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. 1972. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- Liscio, Lorraine. "Beloved's Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 11 (1992): 31-46.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell. 1962. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1978.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Ed. William Andrews. Boston: Hall, 1991. 192-214.
- . "Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—*Dessa Rose*." McDowell and Rampersad 144-63.
- . "Reading Family Matters." *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. 75-97.
- . "'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text." *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: Hall, 1988. 77-90.
- McDowell, Deborah E., and Arnold Rampersad. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Selected Papers from the English Institute, New Series 13. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Morrison, Toni. "African-Americans, Part III: Toni Morrison and Trudier Harris." *Soundings*. WTJU, Charlottesville, VA. 20 February 1991.
- . *Beloved*. New York: Plume-NAL, 1987.

- . "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison." With Naylor. *Southern Review* 21 (1985): 567–93. Rptd. in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 188–217.
- . *The Bluest Eye: A Novel*. New York: Holt, 1970.
- . "An Interview with Toni Morrison." With Nellie McKay. Gates and Appiah 396–411.
- . "Interview with Toni Morrison." With Christina Davis. Gates and Appiah 412–20.
- . "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." With Robert B. Stepto. *Chant of Saints*. Ed. Michael S. Harper and Stepto. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979. 213–29.
- . "It's OK to Say OK." With Sandi Russell. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: Hall, 1988. 43–54.
- . Lecture. Frederick G. Melcher Book Award. Unitarian Universalist Association. Cambridge, MA, 12 October 1988. *Cambridge Forum*. WVTF, Roanoke, VA. 5 April 1991.
- . "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." With Mari Evans. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Evans. Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984. 339–45.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 101–24.
- . "Toni Morrison." With Claudia Tate. *Black Women Writers at Work*. Ed. Claudia Tate. New York: Continuum, 1983. 117–31.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1991.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988): 9–24.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love." *Toni Morrison*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Views Series. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. 27–53.
- Willis, Susan. "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison." *Black American Literature Forum* 16 (1982): 34–42.
- Yellin, Jean Fagin. "Text and Context of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*." Davis and Gates 262–82.
- Zimmerman, Bonnie. "Feminist Fiction and the Postmodern Challenge." *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Westport: Greenwood, 1986. 175–88.