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“Postmodern Blackness”: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the End of History

KIMBERLY CHABOT DAVIS

When they asserted that our postmodern society has reached the “end of history,” theorists Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Francis Fukuyama launched a compelling debate that has persisted for over a decade. They argue that we no longer believe in teleological metanarratives, that our concept of history has become spatial or flattened out, and that we inhabit a perpetual present in which images of the past are merely recycled with no understanding of their original context. In short, they think that postmodern culture has lost a sense of historical consciousness, of cause and effect. Jameson, in particular, sees literary postmodernism as a by-product of this new worldview. Such a controversial stance has, of course, provoked numerous antagonists to speak out. Linda Hutcheon, for example, has written two studies of “historiographic metafiction,” suggesting that much of postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and can accomplish. My project is to examine how Toni Morrison’s acclaimed historical novel *Beloved* (1987) enacts a hybrid vision of history and time that sheds new light on issues addressed by Jameson and Hutcheon in their theories of the postmodern—topics such as the “fictionality” of history, the blurring of past and present, and the questioning of grand historical metanarratives. I argue that while the novel exhibits a postmodern skepticism of sweeping historical narratives, of “Truth,” and of Marxist teleological notions of time as diachronic, it also retains an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future. Morrison’s media-

tions between these two theoretical and political camps—between postmodernism and African American social protest—enable her to draw the best from both and make us question the more extremist voices asserting that our postmodern world is bereft of history.

Since the term *postmodern* has been at the center of many highly charged cultural debates, I am aware that describing *Beloved* as such, even as a “hybrid” postmodern novel, is a gesture that might draw criticism. Clearly, the novel’s status as part of the African American tradition of social protest, and Morrison’s investments in agency, presence, and the resurrection of authentic history, seem to make the novel incompatible with poststructuralist ideas at the root of postmodernism. Morrison herself has spoken out against a postmodernism that she associates with Jameson’s terms. In my view, however, Morrison’s treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon’s postmodern “historiographic metafiction,” but her relationship to this discourse is affected by her aim to write “black-topic” texts. Morrison acknowledges that history is always fictional, always a representation, yet she is also committed to the project of recording African American history in order to heal her readers. Instead of a playful exercise in deconstructing history, Morrison’s *Beloved* attempts to affect the contemporary world of the “real.” While the novel should not simply be assimilated into the canon of postmodernism, Morrison’s work should be recognized as contributing a fresh voice to the debates about postmodern history, a voice that challenges the centrism and elitism of much of postmodern theory. *Beloved* reminds us that history is not “over” for African Americans, who are still struggling to write the genealogies of their people and to keep a historical consciousness alive.

The relationship of African American writers and their work to the discourse of postmodernism has been hotly contested, and there has unfortunately emerged a dichotomy that I would like to question. This relationship has become even more vexed since the Nobel Prize committee bypassed postmodern guru Thomas Pynchon to select Toni Morrison as their 1993 literature winner. Morrison claimed her prize as a victory particularly for African Americans.¹ Black critics such as Barbara Christian continue to argue that Morrison’s work must be understood as an expression of African American forms and traditions, and are concerned that “the power of this novel as a specifically African American text is being blunted” as it is being appropriated by white academic discourse (Christian 6). I too share her suspicion of the increasingly popular move to read Morrison’s fiction through the lens of postmodernism, poststructuralism, or “white” academic theory, a tactic that underestimates the crucial importance of Toni Morrison’s black cultural heritage to any interpretation of her works. While

we must question the tactics of critics like Elliott Butler-Evans, who simply and somewhat blindly plot poststructuralist and postmodernist theory onto Morrison's "black-topic texts," we should be equally wary of concluding that postmodernism is a "white" phenomenon. Any claim that the lives of black people have nothing to do with postmodernism ignores the complex historical interrelationship of black protest and liberal academic discourse. As Andreas Huyssen, Kobena Mercer, and Linda Hutcheon have noted, racial liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s (as well as the feminist movement) contributed to the loosening of cultural boundaries that is seen as characteristically postmodern.² White liberal theorists of postmodernism and African American critics often share an oppositional relationship to the bourgeois state or to the universalizing "objectivity" of some humanist intellectuals. A rigid demarcation between postmodern texts and African American texts merely perpetuates a false dichotomy of academic theory and social protest, ignoring that they emerged in response to a similar set of lived conditions.

I do not seek simply to join the fray of critics who unequivocally claim Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* for one side or the other (postmodernist or "antipostmodernist" social protest) while leaving the text's ambiguities and ambivalences unexplored. Deborah McDowell argues that the theory/practice hierarchy equates theory with men and marginalizes black women to the realm of social protest, and she calls for a "counterhistory . . . [that] would bring theory and practice into a productive tension that would force a reevaluation of each side" (256). I am attempting here to enact that counterhistory, to investigate how Morrison's fiction speaks to postmodern theory and, more importantly, allows us to reevaluate this discourse. I do not aim to measure *Beloved* against the authority of postmodern theorists, but rather to examine how each has represented the spectre of history differently, and to suggest the difference that race can make.

In her novels, interviews, and essays, Toni Morrison has expressed opinions and agendas that resound with the concerns of both critical camps—both postmodernist theorists and African American and feminist critics seeking social agency. Feminist and African American critics have often dismissed postmodernism's philosophical questioning of foundationalism and essentialism as being incompatible with their sociopolitical criticism (Fraser 20–21). Morrison herself acknowledges and occasionally reifies this rift by defining herself in interviews as an antipostmodernist author of black-topic texts, written to pass on agency to her black readers ("Living Memory" 11). Certainly, Morrison's works seem to be defined by the prefixes "pre" or "re" rather than "post"; in *Beloved*, she is more concerned with origins, cycles, and reconstructing agency than with decadence and self-parody. Both *Be-*

loved and her novel *Jazz* are set in time periods of birth and regeneration—the age of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.³

Despite her reluctance to associate her work with postmodernism, I believe that Morrison has produced the kind of hybrid cultural work that socialist feminist Donna Haraway calls for. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Haraway writes:

Feminists have to insist on a better account of the world. . . . So, I think my problem and “our” problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world. (187)

Haraway underscores the urgent need for new and better “her-stories” that might empower women but that are still informed by poststructuralism’s denaturalizing critique, and for narratives that attempt to approximate “true history” while remaining aware of the limits and impossibility of truth or of any historical metanarrative. Morrison’s work can be compared to Haraway’s in its recognition of this dual process; although Morrison demystifies master historical narratives, she also wants to raise “real” or authentic African American history in its place. She deconstructs while she reconstructs, tapping the well of African American “presence.”⁴ As Anthony Hilfer has suggested, Morrison’s novels offers a “both-and,” dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that Linda Hutcheon would argue is itself a distinctly postmodern strategy (Hilfer 91).

Despite the indeterminacies of her fiction, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* can be read as an overt and passionate quest to fill a gap neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the “disremembered and unaccounted for” (274). Rejecting the artificial distinction between fiction and history, Morrison considers artists to be the “truest of historians” (“Behind the Making” 88). In “Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison explicitly describes the project of writing *Beloved* as one of fictional reconstruction or “literary archeology” (112), of imagining the inner life of the slave woman Margaret Garner, her source for Sethe. While working on *The Black Book* (1974), a collection of cultural documents recording African American “history-as-life-lived,” Morrison discovered a newspaper clipping about Garner, a runaway slave who had murdered her children at the moment of capture. Like Denver’s efforts to reconstruct the past through storytelling, Morrison’s narrative has succeeded in “giving blood to the scraps . . . and a heartbeat” to what had been merely an historical curio (*Beloved* 78). The desire to uncover the his-

torical reality of the African American past fuels Morrison's fictional project of literary archeology: "you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" ("Site" 112). Working to fill in the gaps left by the constrained slave narrative genre, she attempts "to rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" in order "to yield up a kind of a truth" (110, 112).

Although this last phrase suggests that Morrison pursues authenticity in her historical renderings, I will argue that she accepts the poststructuralist critique of the idea of a single totalizing Truth or History. While she sees herself as a creative historian who reconstructs, Morrison also works to deconstruct master narratives of "official history" in *Beloved*. Mae Henderson describes the novel as a counternarrative to the "master('s) narrative" (79), one example of which is the newspaper account of Margaret Garner's deed, a document that reappears in the novel as a harsh official alternative to Sethe's emotional interpretation of events. In this novel, the appearance of the newspaper clipping is one of the few intrusions of the dominant culture's process of historical documentation. Morrison drops only a few references to historically recognizable "encyclopedia" events of the period; for example, the Fugitive Slave Bill, the historical fact that provokes Sethe's infanticide, is mentioned only in parentheses (171). Even more striking is her rendering of the Civil War, the apocalypse of American national history, as a minor, inconsequential event in the lives of these former slaves. As Denver lovingly remembers the gift of Christmas cologne she received as a child, she mentions casually and offhandedly that she received it during "one of the war years" (28). Paul D's haunting memory of the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, outweighs the significance of his participation in the war, of which we learn only in the last few pages of the book. The private realities of persecution and daily survival matter more to Sethe and Paul D than any dates or public documents worthy of note in a history textbook. Paul D recognizes that prejudice and racism certainly did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation or the surrender of the Confederate Army: "The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it" (52). Marilyn Sanders Mobley suggests that the fragments of recognizable history in *Beloved* "punctuate the text and . . . disrupt the text of the mind which is both historical and ahistorical at the same time" (196).⁵ While I agree that these historical facts appear as interruptions, I would argue that the minds of Sethe and Paul D are never "ahistorical." Rather, Morrison attempts to redefine history as an amalgamation of local narratives, as a jumble of personal as well as publicly recorded triumphs and tragedies.

Morrison's commitment to historical remembering arises from her con-

cern about the ignorance of and even contempt for the past that she sees in both contemporary African American and postmodern culture. In an interview in 1988, she remarked: "the past is absent or it's romanticised. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past" ("Living Memory" 11). While working on *The Black Book* in the early 1970s, Morrison expressed disdain for the Black Power movement's creation of new myths and their retreat to ancient African myths of the "far and misty past" ("Behind the Making" 87). More relevant to the process of liberation, she felt, was knowledge of the 300-year history of African Americans. In the 1988 interview, Morrison applauded the emergence of a new body of historical fiction by black writers, and she found it ironic "that black writers are descending deeper into historical concerns at the same moment white literati are abolishing it in the name of something they call 'post modernism.' . . . History has become impossible for them" (11). Morrison seems here to accept Fredric Jameson's negative portrayal of postmodernism—a definition contested by Hutcheon and others—as historical "depthlessness" and "a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality" (*New Left Review* 58). Back in 1974, Morrison also expressed concerns that would be echoed by Jameson, a concern that real history was being replaced by historicism—the textualizing of time as a mere representation, as a simulacrum (to use Jean Baudrillard's formulation). Sounding rather Marxist, Morrison bemoaned the "shallow" myths of the black liberation movement's Afrocentrism, "because our children can't use and don't need and will certainly reject history-as-imagined. They deserve better: history as life lived," which Morrison was attempting to record in *The Black Book* ("Behind the Making" 88).

Although in 1974 Morrison sounds like a Jamesonian precursor, criticizing contemporary literature's historical travesties, in *Beloved* she has offered a different conception of the relationship between history and fiction, acknowledging that all history is "imagined," and that all knowledge of the past is derived from representations, such as *Beloved* itself. As Donna Haraway seeks better scientific stories, Morrison attempts to draw a historical portrait closer to "life lived," but she recognizes that no totalizing truth can ever be reached.⁶ Morrison's fictional works offer a different theory of "postmodernist history" than does Jameson, and critics who try to read Morrison's work through Jameson's lens end up misreading the novels. Elliott Butler-Evans uses scanty textual support to argue that *Tar Baby* is postmodern (in Jameson's definition) because it offers "a displacement of history by 'historicism,' in which the past is reread and reconstructed in the present" (152). As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, the fundamental prob-

lem with Jameson's formulation is his rigid distinction between authentic history and inauthentic historicism. Jameson describes our postmodern society as one "bereft of all historicity, whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles . . . the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (*New Left Review* 66). For Morrison, history and "historicism" are one and the same, and her work offers a necessary correction to Jameson's theories, precisely because she questions the assumption that there is a knowable reality behind the inauthentic simulation or representation.

Moments of self-reflexivity in her text remind the reader that Morrison is also constructing a textual representation of the past, just as historians did before her. When Paul D is confronted by the newspaper account of Sethe's deed, the reader is made aware that textual documents often—or always—fail to capture life exactly as it is experienced. Although he cannot read, Paul D finds the representation of Sethe's face to be inauthentic: "that ain't her mouth" (154). While Paul D is wrong in denying the truth of Sethe's infanticide, his reaction to the picture of Sethe makes the reader aware of the difference between a real-live original and any simulation, either photographic or textual. At the same moment, however, the possibility of distinguishing between the real and the reproduction is rendered unstable, and the very concept of authenticity is put into question as Paul D doubts both the white culture's representation and his own knowledge of the real woman, Sethe. In this scene, Morrison seems to be revising her previous belief that the documents collected in *The Black Book* could offer authentic history as life lived; now she suggests that a fictional account of the interior life of a former slave might be more historically "real" than actual documents, which were often written from the perspective of the dominant culture. While Morrison reminds us of the slippage between signifier and signified in the scene with the newspaper clipping, she also calls attention to the fact that the past is only available to us through textual traces, such as *Beloved* and *The Black Book*. Newspapers—as a figure for discourse itself—make one other appearance in the novel. They are stacked in a pile in the woodshed, the pivotal space in which Sethe kills her baby, and where the resurrected Beloved lures Paul D to have sex; the printed words of the newspapers are metaphoric spectators to the "real" action of this fictional story. This metaphor allows Morrison simultaneously to point out the gap between representation and reality and to suggest that we can only know the past through discourse. She seems to concur with the poststructuralist view that reality is a function of discourse, yet does not let this point pacify her into accepting the representations that exist—the voyeuristic news accounts and the constrained slave narratives. I would argue that Morrison's

sociopolitical project is the idea that new representations can change our perceptions of historical reality.

Morrison's choice of epigraphs also reflects her dual response to the representation/reality dialectic. Hutcheon argues that the inclusion of paratextual materials, such as epigraphs, serves both to "remind us of the narrativity (and fictionality) of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity" (*Politics* 85). Morrison's choice of two epigraphs underscores this dialectic; one points to the historical "fact" of the Middle Passage, the other to a text (the Bible) that has often been received as fact. While the Scriptures themselves blur the boundary between fact and fiction, the "60 million and more" statistic is an estimation gleaned from historical records. Although the Middle Passage was a horrific historical reality, the estimated number is not a verifiable fact because the deaths of slaves were often deemed unworthy of recording. All the lives lost can never be accounted for, because our access to history is always limited by words and by those who have control of textual production. Thus, in beginning her novel with these epigraphs, Morrison seems both to ground her fictional work in historical reality and also to question the possibility of ever finding the historical referent outside of or preceding representation.

As an artist, Morrison places a great deal of faith in the power of representation to determine our perceptions of reality. For her, the character of *Beloved* has become a piece of living history—words made into flesh. According to Morrison, she drew *Beloved* as a composite of the dead child of Margaret Garner, and of a "dead girl" from a Van der Zee photograph—a girl who had been murdered by a jealous ex-lover ("A Conversation" 583–84). Morrison remarked passionately in an interview:

bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails might be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called . . . she is here now, alive. ("A Conversation" 593)

Morrison's commitment to resurfacing the dead and paying tribute to black Americans of previous generations has made her works particularly poignant to African American readers. With the novel's newly acquired place in the canon of American literature, Morrison's representation has helped to contribute to the historical consciousness of Americans, just as the television miniseries *Roots* did in the 1970s. The popularity of *Beloved* and the healing power of its representation may have enlarged our culture's understanding of black women's history and of the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction era.

To ground my argument that Morrison's fiction has much to contribute to a postmodern theoretical debate about history and representation, I will turn to a close reading of the novel and suggest that its thematic interest in temporality relates to larger concerns about history. If Morrison's career reveals both a desire for "authentic" history-as-life-lived and the postmodernist realization that history is a fictional construct, the plot of her novel *Beloved* is marked by a parallel dialectic: the mind's struggle between remembering and forgetting the past. *Beloved* is a novel about the traumas and healing powers of memory, or "rememory" as Sethe calls it, adding a connotation of cyclical recurrence. Sethe's ambivalent relationship to her cruel past creates a kind of wavelike narrative effect, as memories surface and are repressed. On the one hand, "Sethe worked hard to remember . . . as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious," offering her memories of the beauty of Sweet Home rather than of her children (6). Painfully aware that she lacks control of her memory, Sethe also attempts to repress, to "start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73). The ghost child Beloved represents the "return of the repressed" past that demands to be worked through and not forgotten. Although the novel proves Sethe wrong in her belief that "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42), the text also contends that neither must the past consume us. With Beloved's entrenchment at 124 Bluestone, Sethe's life begins to ebb away, her strength sapped by the swelling ghost daughter, a figure for the threatening past. Morrison suggests that dwelling on one's own past, or the collective past of the slaves, can strangle your present as Beloved nearly strangles Sethe in the Clearing.

Toni Morrison's novel endorses neither a Marxist obsessive, teleological historical remembering nor a "postmodernist" forgetting of the past, and suggests instead that both processes are necessary to move into the future.⁷ The simultaneity of remembering and forgetting is evident in Sethe's state of mind after Beloved's return: "her mind was busy with the things she could forget" (191). At the end of the novel, the ambiguity of the repeated phrase "It was not a story to pass on" also enacts the simultaneity of moving forward and looking back, since "passing on" has two meanings: sharing the tale with future generations and walking on by and forgetting the story. Thus, although Morrison promotes a delving into the historical past, she realizes that the past must be processed and sometimes forgotten in order for one to function in the present and to "pass on" to the future. Her earlier statements, when working on *The Black Book*, about the crucial need for knowledge of recent history have been qualified in *Beloved*, which teaches that a historical memory also has its costs, resulting often in the reopening—rather than the healing—of old psychic wounds.

One way to free oneself from the horrors of the past is to reenact and reconfigure the past in the present, as Sethe does with an icepick at the end of the novel, attacking not her own children this time but the white man Bodwin, whom she perceives as a reincarnation of her slave master Schoolteacher. Mae Henderson argues that this reconfiguration of the past delivers Sethe, who “demonstrates her possession *of* rather than *by* the past,” and thus exorcizes *Beloved* (Henderson 80). While Henderson rightly asserts the importance of a “mediation between remembering (possession) and forgetting (exorcism),” she seems to grant more subversive powers of agency to Sethe than the close of the novel actually suggests (82). After this attempt to reenact “the Misery,” Sethe is hardly healed, whole and “reborn,” as Henderson argues, but has resigned herself to die rather than live as a “bleak and minus nothing” (*Beloved* 270). Sethe admits that “something is missing . . . something more than *Beloved*” (270). While Henderson celebrates her as a subversive heroine and revisionist historian who has achieved the power to change the past, she ignores the fact that Sethe is still haunted by her complicity with whites at the end of the book, as she recalls that she compliantly “made the ink” that allowed Schoolteacher to delineate her “animal” characteristics (271). Morrison, I believe, presents a more balanced and postmodernist view by acknowledging both Sethe’s complicities and her subversions, and recognizing that Sethe has limited power to revise or erase the past.

Many critics have read the ending (and the expression “pass on”) as an indication that Sethe is healed and *Beloved* put back in her place, but I find that the last chapter denies such a simplistic closure. Morrison ends the novel with the word “*Beloved*,” suggesting that the past is a lasting presence, waiting to be resurrected: “Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go . . . should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit” (275). Although the ending suggests partial healing, the spectre of the past remains, waiting to resurface. I find *Beloved*’s ending similar to Hutcheon’s description of the postmodern historiographic novel: “the past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled . . . the past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgment of limitation as well as power” (*Politics* 58).

While Henderson’s analysis is often insightful, I find her view to be one-sided, because she ignores the novel’s postmodernist suspicion of coherent and logical historical narratives that attempt to smooth over the disorder of lived experience. I disagree with her suggestion that this novel creates coherence out of the lives dismembered by slavery. She writes: “If dismemberment deconstitutes the whole . . . then re-memory functions to re-collect,

re-assemble, and organize into a meaningful sequential whole through . . . the process of narrativization" (71). Henderson uses words like "cohesive" to describe Sethe's narrative, an adjective that seems inappropriate for a novel that rejects closure and facile narrative solutions. In opposition to Henderson, Emily Miller Budick cogently argues that gaps left by a tragic past are not easily filled or smoothed over in this work: "recovering the missing [child] . . . reconstituting in the present what was lost in the past, will not, this book insists, restore order and logic to lives that have been interrupted by such loss" (131).

I would argue along with Budick that Morrison's novel does not aim to fill in all the gaps of the historical past; the result of her literary archeology is not a complete skeleton, but a partial one, with pieces deliberately missing or omitted. Because the reconstruction is not total, the reader is engaged in the process of imagining history herself. Although Morrison's historical project is to unveil the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (*Beloved* 199), many things nevertheless remain inaudible or buried in the novel, and these gaps can be read as characteristically postmodern.⁸ When Paul D confronts Sethe with the newspaper clipping about the murder of her child, Sethe is unable to give voice to the unspoken: "she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask" (163). Of course, she continues to try to pin it down throughout the rest of the novel, but rather than a complete and seamless product, the process of putting some of her memory into words is stressed here.

Rather than the "meaningful sequential whole" that Henderson finds, I see a text with many holes and gaps, a testament to the incoherence of "life lived," especially the life of a freed slave.⁹ For example, the novel begins with Howard and Bugler, but we never learn their fate, or that of their father Hale. Who was the girl whose red ribbon Stamp Paid finds attached to a raft? This novel never forgets or underestimates the difficulty of representing the lives of the disremembered and unaccounted for, "the people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181). The Middle Passage, in which "sixty million and more" slaves died, is another significant gap that looms on the horizon, and can only be obliquely alluded to in the novel's epigraph, in Sethe's buried memories of her mother's story, and in *Beloved's* postmodern fragmented narrative that blends the historical past and present. *Beloved's* disjointed narrative, composed of phrases with no punctuation, calls attention to the visual spaces on the page, a metaphor for the gaps in the storytelling. In *Beloved's* narrative, "it is always now" (210), and Morrison combines imagined scenes of life on the slave ships with details from *Beloved* and Sethe's stories:

the little hill of dead people . . . the men without skin push them through with poles . . . the woman [Sethe] is there with the face I want . . . the face that is mine . . . the woman with my face is in the sea . . . her sharp earrings are gone. (211–12)

Barbara Christian has written of *Beloved* as a novel giving voice to this “unspeakable event” of the Middle Passage, an event almost erased from American cultural memory (6). Although I agree that Morrison has attempted to imagine this “terrible space” in American history, the gap cannot be completely bridged, and the psychic trauma on the slave ships can only be narrated elusively.

Unlike a traditional novelistic development of teleological, “sequential and meaningful” narration, Toni Morrison’s narrative technique stresses the fact that black Americans, particularly freed slaves, did not experience time or history as an ordered and linear sequence of events. Morrison’s narrative techniques are echoed in the novel by Denver, who weaves stories, constructing “out of the string she had heard all her life a net to hold *Beloved*” (76). Both Morrison and Denver weave a porous net with their storytelling, leaving gaps to allow some of the mysterious and unspeakable past to escape narration, to flow on through. Morrison both recognizes the important healing powers of narration, yet understands the limits of representation and of the storytelling process. Hutcheon finds this dual response to narration to be postmodern:

A plot, be it seen as a narrative structure . . . is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. But the simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are both part of the postmodern contradictory response to emplotment. (*Politics* 68)

This indeterminacy and double movement contribute to the richness of Morrison’s text, enabling it to engender a plethora of critical interpretations, often at odds with one another.

As I have suggested, Linda Hutcheon clearly finds Morrison to be a postmodernist writer with a dialectic quality and a deconstructive political project—to write new “ex-centric” definitions of history from the margins. Working with a more generalized concept of postmodernism than does Hutcheon, Anthony Hilfer presents an important warning to critics who view Toni Morrison’s work as a response to, or derivative of, academic postmodernism: “Morrison derives her indeterminacies not from French postmodernism nor from the new, oddly dematerialized forms of Marxism but from the center of African American culture . . . jazz” (93). In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison remarked: “Classical music satisfies and

closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. And it agitates you. . . . I want my books to be like that" (McKay 429). Although it is significant that Morrison finds the sources of her indeterminacies in jazz, and not theories of the postmodern developed by white academics, their similarities arise out of shared conditions of urbanity and the chaos of modern life. Toni Morrison herself acknowledges this similarity: "Black women had to deal with 'post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier . . . certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability" ("Living Memory" 11).

Although Morrison seems to stand against postmodernism and post-structuralism by claiming to write an "authentic" African American history of slavery that aims to reconstruct a stable sense of self for her characters, Morrison's narrative strategies nonetheless share some affinities with postmodern fiction, as described by Linda Hutcheon. But I do not mean to suggest that Morrison's work can be grouped comfortably alongside postmodern writers such as Milan Kundera or Thomas Pynchon. Hutcheon herself is guilty of marginalizing African American writers in her books; after extended readings of texts by white men, she merely refers to Morrison and Ishmael Reed as participants in the same postmodern historiography. Elliott Butler-Evans runs into this problem when he simply attempts to graft Jameson's criteria for postmodern fiction onto Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*, which he claims exhibits "pastiche and collage as structuring devices; the emergence of a schizophrenic textual structure; a displacement of history by 'historicism'" (152). Although Morrison's work contains strong doses of irony, *Beloved's* overwhelmingly serious tone and overt political project make it difficult to describe as parody or playful pastiche. Nothing less than the reconstruction of the erased history of the African American people motivates Morrison, rather than playful exercises in form, however politically subversive these aesthetic innovations may be. In my view, race signifies more than Butler-Evans and Hutcheon acknowledge. Hutcheon locates the politics of postmodernism in its aesthetics but ignores agency and the subversive political content that Morrison and other African American novelists aim for. I argue that the politics of Toni Morrison's texts can be found both in her aesthetic strategies and in the kind of historical consciousness that her characters enact as they struggle with their own temporality.

The critical commentary about Morrison's decision to develop a circular, nonlinear narrative technique offers a useful case study of the competing trends in the critical reception of *Beloved*. Many critics cite the following passage, in which Sethe's concept of time becomes clear as she evades Paul D's questions about the newspaper clipping:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. . . . Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. (163)

Deconstructionist critics read this passage as a rejection of "long-drawn-out" linear and teleological historical narratives, in favor of a circular experience of time without a center. For example, Catherine Rainwater argues that Morrison's circular patterns are postmodern because they are never completed (Sethe "could never close in") and thus deny traditional narrative closure (101). Barbara Hill Rigney has found Morrison's circular narrative to be an example of Julia Kristeva's concept of "woman's time" as circular (nonphallic) and cyclical, reflecting the natural cycles of reproduction and the seasons (76). In answer to poststructuralist critics, Barbara Christian notes that in African cosmology, time is nonlinear, and thus Morrison's and Sethe's circling finds root in an ancestral worldview rather than in the work of Derrida (13). Feminist and poststructuralist readings that celebrate the nonlinear narrative forget that circles are also laden with ominous symbolism in an African American context, since they recall the circles of iron (and nooses) surrounding the necks of slaves, particularly the "neck jewelry" that Paul D was forced to wear. Thus, while all of these critics agree that Toni Morrison uses a circular narrative technique to subvert a linear reading of time and history, each accounts for her motives differently.

Placing questions of authorial intent aside, I believe that the text itself portrays circularity in both a positive and a negative light, as both an accurate reflection of the mind's "rememory" process and as a treadmill from which one must escape in order to move forward in time. Rejecting a linear time-consciousness, Sethe expresses her belief that time is spatial and operates like a wheel, and that past events are waiting to recur:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. . . . Places, places are still there. . . . The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. (35–36)

The belief that "nothing ever dies" haunts Sethe as she tries desperately to protect Denver from reliving the events of her past. Sethe attempts to subvert this recurring cycle by creating a kind of "timeless present" in her home, where she hopes the past can no longer hurt Denver or Beloved

(184). Sethe wants to “hurry time along and get to the no-time waiting for her” at 124, where her infanticide has been erased by the miraculous return of Beloved (191). Morrison accompanies Sethe’s discovery of Beloved’s true identity with a textual shift from the past tense (which dominates the novel before this point) to the present tense: “this day they are outside” (120). Although Sethe hopes that her timeless world has put a stop to the cycle in which the past can return to haunt, 124’s no-time represents a different kind of vicious circle—with the past, present, and future collapsed into one.

Both Sethe’s concepts of a timeless present and the spatial time from which she wants to escape are echoed in Fredric Jameson’s discussion of postmodernism. In an interview, Jameson summed up the thesis of his book *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* with the remark that “time has become a perpetual present and thus spatial” in postmodern culture (Stephanson 46). Retaining a Marxist desire for teleology and linearity, Jameson regrets the postmodern flattening of time, arguing that it deprives people of a “true” sense of history, of cause and effect, of “deep phenomenological experience” (*Postmodernism* 134). He is nostalgic for “the great high modernist thematic of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory [found in the works of Faulkner]. . . . we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic” (*Postmodernism* 16). Morrison is more willing than Jameson to entertain the possibility of spatial time as an authentic experience rather than a loss or a mere “simulacrum.” In her essay “The Site of Memory,” she uses the metaphor of the archeological site to refer to memories of the past, as if they were a place that one could visit to mine for bits of history. As Mobley has argued, Beloved’s narrative, lacking punctuation, suggests the “seamlessness of time, [and] the inextricability of the past and present, of ancestors and their progeny” (196). The concept of history in *Beloved* is not flattened but rather takes on extra volume to contain the cultural memories of ancestors, to which we can have access only through imagination.

Rather than exhibiting “historical depthlessness,” Morrison’s works may be seen as modernist (in Jameson’s terms) because they respect the importance of deep memory and explore the relationship between the past and the present. On the other hand, her novels also exhibit a postmodern skepticism of teleological narratives and of the modernist myth of forward progress espoused by Marxists. Because she rejects a modernist diachronic view of history, Morrison explores the idea of a more synchronic, spatial experience of time.¹⁰ Her spatial sense of time can be read not only as a postmodern form of temporality, but it could also be viewed as an expression of the temporal experiences of African Americans, who are often de-

nied a future and are therefore haunted by or retreat to the past. Sethe is clearly frustrated and "boxed in" by time; she cannot construct an ordered timeline of her life, so she attempts her experiment of living only in the present, as do many hopeless inner-city youth.

Although Morrison embraces a more synchronic concept of time than does Jameson, she concurs with him in rejecting the *timeless* world of 124 Bluestone, a timelessness that both identify—wrongly, I think—with postmodernism. While she suggests that time need not be perceived as linear, it nevertheless must be respected and dealt with. From his experience on the chain gang, Paul D learned that living only in the present moment is like not living at all, because life means "caring and looking forward, remembering and looking back" (109). Although Sethe believes she has created an idyllic no-time at 124, Stamp Paid finds the house to be encircled by strange "voices that ringed 124 like a noose" (183). The timeless circle must be broken or Sethe and Denver will be strangled, their future erased. I disagree with Mobley, who reads the last dialogue in which the voices of the three women merge as the final word and concluding message of the text, a message that "the past, present, and future are all one and the same" (Mobley 196). This reading of time as wholly synchronic ignores the text's attempt to preserve some temporal boundaries (however permeable) and to prevent the swirling eddy around 124 from turning into a black hole. Morrison's theoretical conception of temporality is best expressed through the figure of the wheel—of a circle rolling forward (or occasionally backward) through time, while continually kicking up the dust of the past. Although wheels are circular, I do not believe that Morrison pursues a sense of wholeness that her circular narrative strategy might suggest, because the circles are never completed, the center never reached, and the "rememory" process always unfinished. The figure of the wheel can instead be translated into a progressive temporal strategy for a postmodern society—a strategy of learning from the past but not being paralyzed by its lessons, of forging a loose and flexible synthesis out of the fragments of history, of reaping the benefits of both a diachronic and a synchronic sense of time.

The lessons about history and temporality offered by Toni Morrison in her masterwork should and must be critically discussed in relationship to academic discourses about postmodernism. Postmodern theories need to be modified to accommodate texts like *Beloved* with an overt political agenda of social protest, and to recognize these fictions as contributions to a theoretical discourse of contemporary life. As bell hooks argues in her essay "Postmodern Blackness," there is a crucial need for black-topic texts to be read in light of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory and its indeterminacies, while maintaining attention to the texts' specific messages for

black readers. Like hooks, I believe that such a culturally powerful discourse as postmodernism should not be left in the hands of the elite few. Although many postmodern theorists emphasize “difference,” the literary category is often used by critics to refer to a sealed set of texts, usually produced by white men. I would like to see postmodernism continue to be a site of contestation for meaning, cultural power, and political change. *Beloved* poses a challenge to neat theories because it balances on the cusp between two worldviews, subverting the dichotomy between African American social protest (based on a modernist ideology) and a postmodernist questioning of metanarratives about history and time. It is precisely the ambivalences of this novel that make it “beloved” by so many critical groups, but these indeterminacies themselves seem to resist the many and varied critics who have tried to claim Morrison for their very own. I believe that it is more important to explore what her representations have to offer to all of us, simultaneously.

NOTES

¹ See Grimes, as well as “Nobel Prize in Literature” in *Jet* magazine. Morrison told *Jet*: “Winning as an American is very special—but winning as a Black American is a knockout” (34).

² See Huyssen 191, 194, and 199; Mercer 424–25; and Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 62.

³ The term “Harlem Renaissance” is itself a construction of literary historians and somewhat of a misnomer. How could the African American literary tradition have been experiencing a rebirth, some argue, when it hadn’t yet established itself? The term served to reinvent a past in order to forge a present and a future, and this move is strikingly similar to the projects of many postmodern historical novelists.

⁴ In “Behind the Making of *The Black Book*,” Morrison writes: “It has what I believe may be the only mythic quality unique to Black people: presence” (89). She made this statement in 1974 before Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence won over the American academy, but I think she would concur today.

⁵ Mobley’s formulation echoes that of Nietzsche in his seminal essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”

⁶ See Rigney’s *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, which analyzes her mythmaking as a view of history that isn’t totalizing.

⁷ I use Jameson’s false dichotomy between Marxism and postmodernism here purposefully to show that Morrison ruptures this binary opposition.

⁸ Levy makes a similar argument in “Telling *Beloved*” 114–23.

⁹ Grant sees similar absences in *Sula*. See “Absence into Presence.”

¹⁰ Morrison’s relationship to modernism is obviously dependent on one’s definition of this heterogeneous body of literature and on one’s choice of central texts. Many literary critics have argued that modern poetry is also spatial—

see Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." T. S. Eliot, in both his essays and his poems, presents a conception of history that is both synchronic and diachronic (narrative) simultaneously. I would argue that the central difference between Morrison and Eliot is that Morrison would challenge his elitist view of literature as a series of monuments. Her investigations of time and historical consciousness are also more directly linked to her progressive politics. Eliot may be concerned with spatial form (in poetry) and a spatial sense of literary history (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"), but he does not share Morrison's interest in the possibility of spatial memory for every individual, even those of the masses.

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