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Reconstructing Kin: Family, History, and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

D A N A H E L L E R

In “Reading Family Matters,” Deborah E. McDowell narrates the on-going controversy surrounding a small but outstanding group of black female writers and critics’ accusations that these writers are fracturing the image of an already besieged black American nuclear family. The complaint, which has been registered in the news media and academic journals, suggests that these writers—Toni Morrison among them—have betrayed the black family by failing to shoulder responsibility for restoring to it an image of wholeness and unity. Admittedly, McDowell observes, the “family romance is deromanticized in writings by the greater majority of black women,” whose portraits of domestic life do not simply paint Norman Rockwell in black, but rather seek out the distinct voices of black women, themes appropriate to their experience within the nuclear family, and narrative forms that place black women at the center of stories about family (78). Consequently, reading and understanding black women’s family narratives can present certain conflicts. For example, if we proceed from Marianne Hirsch’s treatment of family romance as “an imaginary interrogation of origins” that “describes the experience of familial structures as discursive” (9), we see the unmistakable cultural bias towards Freudian

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principles, implicit in which is a notion of family structure already in place, and a notion of origin as ultimately knowable. However, the modern European definition of family plots has little relevance to a people displaced from their homeland, denied their claims to origin, separated from one another, forbidden their language, and refused participation in the dominant discursive economy to which they are subordinated. Regardless of where one stands on “family values,” experienced readers of African-American fiction will rightly claim that the “de-romanticization” of the black family romance owes a great deal to the complex forms of economic and psychological oppression that black women and men have experienced both within the nuclear family and within the larger economic structure. In contemporary literature, this matrix of racism, sexism, and classism is registered in recurrent images of family violence, absent fathers, and woman-centered black families that function without the presence or support of men.

The cultural significance of these images, however, can be traced to a bigger picture of which contemporary family life is only a part. That picture is the historical processes of American social and economic development. Its organizing principle is racial oppression, or more specifically the dynamic of relations of domination perpetuated by the institutional enslavement of Africans who were brought to the American colonies as indentured servants as early as 1619.¹

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, is a critical interrogation of family romance that examines the social deconstruction of African-American history and family life in the years before, during, and after the Civil War when the United States became engaged in the project of “Reconstruction.” More importantly for the purposes of my analysis, it is a novel centrally concerned with the need to rediscover or literally re-member the fractured stories of the past so that these stories might preserve lost culture and restore the familial and community bonds, which, although severely weakened by generations of enslavement, still function reciprocally to construct identity. As the novel demonstrates, it is these structures of narrative, these stories, that empower and unite the family.

While the reconstruction of family relations remains a central focus of *Beloved*, there is also significant stress placed on the need to dismantle the boundaries that separate family from community, private from public concerns. The novel brings about the gradual merger of those inside and those outside the haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison suggests that a family closed off from caring relationships with nonkin is a family doomed to be consumed by the spirits of the unresolved past. As Sethe gives herself over more and more to Beloved’s insatiable greed, a symbiotic union forms between the two that leaves Sethe starved and weak while Beloved grows fatter by the day. The women’s withdrawal into 124, and into the reflective eyes of each other, is expressed in a series of interior voice passages that seem to blend together into one familial voice, although Morrison structures each section so that it must be read separately from the others, thus maintaining the integrity of individual consciousness within the triad.²

Beloved is a ghost story that challenges white-dominant culture’s frame of reference for experiencing familial drama. Morrison’s artistic narrative style, her merger of the powers of the past and the present, the living and the dead, the private sphere and the public sphere, unsettles the definitional boundaries

of the Western European traditions of family romance and novelistic realism. In short, Morrison's critical project, like Hirsch's critical project on mother-daughter family romance, appears to take "as its point of departure the intersection of familial structures and structures of plotting" (3). But what has not been sufficiently explored, to my mind, is the extent to which the novel challenges the limits of narrative and familial systems in order to redefine the structures of African-American kinship and the structures of an African-American story-telling tradition as mutually determining.

Comparing families to minefields, Mary Helen Washington writes: "We walk and dance through them never knowing where or when something or someone is going to explode" (1). Indeed, there has been—and still is—much to say about the explosive mother-daughter relationships depicted in *Beloved*.³ But what need be acknowledged are the actual shapes that familial representations take within historically-specific communities of women, and the forms that make communication—even explosive communication—possible between generations separated by the brutality of a slave-labor economy that places the value of a dollar above the value of human life.

The central event of Morrison's intricately woven narrative is a brutal act of infanticide: After sending her three children ahead to safety, Sethe escapes from a Kentucky plantation known as Sweet Home. In flight, she gives birth to a daughter and arrives with the new infant at 124 Bluestone Road, a house situated near Cincinnati, Ohio. With her four children, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and the attentive local community, Sethe experiences twenty-eight days of freedom before the sadistic master of the plantation, a man known as Schoolteacher, catches up with her. When she sees his wagon approaching the house at Bluestone Road, Sethe takes her children to the shed out back and in a desperate effort to protect them—to put them all someplace where they'd be safe—she attempts to kill them, although ultimately there is only time to cut the throat of her eldest daughter, who bleeds to death in her arms.

Schoolteacher returns to Kentucky empty-handed. Sethe survives with her remaining children, two sons and the new infant, Denver, named after a white girl who stopped to soothe Sethe's wounds and help her deliver during the escape. After serving a sentence in prison, Sethe returns to 124 where she, Baby Suggs, and Denver withdraw into the house, rejected by the community, which stands in harsh and disbelieving judgment of what they perceive to be her brutal and inexcusable "crime." Sethe's two sons run away and Baby Suggs, once a great healer and spiritual leader of the local black community, retreats to her bed to die. The house becomes violently haunted with the angry and confused spirit of the baby girl deprived of her mother's love and a chance to live.

Sethe and Denver continue to live with the restless spirit, in the house that glows red with rage and despair, until the day when Paul D, a former slave from the same plantation where Sethe was held, appears on the front porch of 124 after many years of aimless and sorrowful drifting. The narrative opens with his arrival, a moment that marks the beginning of a healing process for both him and Sethe. As they begin to recount to one another their lives, hardships, and mutual grief, they discover through the telling of these stories a connection to a past that must be confronted and exorcised if each is to have a future. Subsequently, the house begins to quake with the demanding spirit of loss that

is the ghost-child, Beloved. Paul D rebukes the spirit, restores a momentary calm, and in the same instant realizes the dismal conditions under which Sethe and Denver have been living all these years.

One day, when Paul D, Sethe, and Denver return home from a local carnival, they find a young woman, fully dressed and wearing a broken-rimmed hat, sitting on a tree stump. When questioned about her circumstances and origins she says only that her name is Beloved. Beyond this she appears to have no memory, no history, and no identity. Without further interrogation, Sethe and Denver nurse Beloved back to health and gradually she begins recalling details and moments from the past that only a family member could possibly know about. Beloved demonstrates powerful need. At first, she craves anything with sugar. As her recovery progresses she becomes ravenous for information about Sethe's past. Story-telling thus becomes the treatment that Sethe administers in order to nurse Beloved back to strength.

The question Beloved's emergence occasions is two-fold: is this young woman the ghost of the murdered child assuming human form? And, if she is the child returned from the dead, *why* has she returned, and what does she want? There is disagreement among critics concerning these questions, as well as the symbolic significance of the mysterious figure. While the majority agree that Beloved is a ghost, a visitor from the spirit world who makes visible the potent connection between the living and the dead, Deborah Horvitz has argued that she is a living being, an escaped slave who has been traumatized senseless, and upon whom Sethe projects her wish of reestablishing a bond with her murdered daughter.⁴ Similarly, Rebecca Ferguson holds the opinion that *Beloved* is centrally concerned with women's role in maintaining the continuity of family life, though in a much broader sense, "through the protection of their children, their men and the community" (112). Consequently, for Ferguson, Beloved is more than the specific link between generations of women: "Beloved is above all a connection," she claims, "the reconnection with and restoring of all that was lost when [Sethe] was driven to kill her" (114).

The "connection" that Beloved represents is symbolized in Morrison's text by the bridge upon which Beloved claims she stood before finding her way to 124. In this way, Beloved is perhaps best understood as an embodiment of history held aloft by a foundation we call memory, a foundation that is shown to be partial and fragmentary. And indeed, history and memory, both individual and collective, are precisely the intertwining forces that construct, and at the same time threaten to destroy, the kinship group. It is my view that Beloved represents the family as well as the familial. She is as much the family Sethe, Denver, and Paul D have lost as she is all the families separated and dismembered under the slavery system. And the reason she comes back is the same as the reason that this novel had to be written: in order to understand. Beloved will remain the undoing of kinship structure until she reaches this understanding, and the way she reaches it is by demanding that the past be remembered through the gradual stitching together of stories. She is this need for stories, stories without which Sethe can never move forward, take hold of her life, her kin, and find the courage to love again.

As a study of the connection between the historical and the familial, *Beloved* is concerned with the healing of the black American family and the "reconstruction" of kinship structures. These structures had been violated by

the cruel fact of family life under the slavery system: as enslaved Africans, women and men had no right to themselves, to one another, or to their children. Consequently, for Baby Suggs, “the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). Under the yoke of slavery, permeable and unstable kinship structures were often necessary so that parents could entrust their children to someone else if they were sold away or separated. Often, as a result, children were parented more by a community of caretakers than by their biological parents, and in this sense “family” came to mean a structure of relations capable of transcending blood kin to form an extended family including neighbors and friends. By necessity, “family” had to be structured in such a way as to include these “fictive kin,” a communal network of caring individuals. *Beloved* explores this vital connection between the biological family and fictive kinship relations as necessary for blacks’ survival, although contrary to the Freudian triad that has served as a prominent cultural reference point for conventional understandings of what family means.

In the cultural and economic redefinition of family life that followed upon the end of the Civil War and the gradual abolishment of the slavery system, many freed blacks were forced again to sacrifice their ties to family and community with their realization that their new “freedom” meant little more than abject poverty. Morrison describes this transitional period after the Civil War when freed blacks sought to reconstruct the pieces and fragments of the family and of themselves:

Odd clusters and strays of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenectady to Jackson. Dazed but insistent, they searched each other out for word of a cousin, an aunt, a friend . . . Some of them were running from family that could not support them, some to family; some were running from dead crops, dead kin, life threats and took-over land. Boys younger than Buglar and Howard; configurations and blends of families of women and children . . . (52)

Karen E. Fields’ argument that “the essence of slavery was the creation of free-standing individuals, not families or communities,” provides a useful gloss to the above passage. “As units of commodity to be bought, sold, or put to use, individual slaves stood apart from any authoritative claim to human connection” (163). The economic institution of slavery destroyed black families not only by the forced separation of kin, but by the radical isolation and appropriation of the individual-as-merchandise.

Beloved’s relentless need, her demand to be seen and heard, constitutes an outraged cry against this isolation. Her assumption of human form takes place at exactly the moment when Sethe, Denver, and Paul D begin to form some semblance of a communicative triad. “[*Beloved*] had appeared and been taken in on the very day Sethe and [Paul D] had patched up their quarrel, gone out in public and had a right good time—like a family” (66). *Beloved*’s arrival at this pivotal moment suggests both her desire to be included in this family-like group, and her infantile need to sever Sethe’s new-found lifeline lest her memory be reconciled and her name forgotten. It is significant also that the ghost of the murdered child appears just as her mother returns from a carnival, her first “social outing in eighteen years” (46). The family bond that Sethe, Denver, and Paul D reestablish takes place in the context of a life-affirming ritual, a celebra-

tion of the continuous cycles of birth, decay, death, and rebirth. As they head towards the carnival they pass a lumberyard fence where “Up and down . . . old roses were dying. . . . The closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent, and everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of the rotten roses” (47). The possibility of a new life juxtaposed with the sickly sweet aroma of imminent death anticipates Beloved’s image and the confrontation of the living and the dead that her arrival occasions.⁵ Through her association of the carnival with the fetid roses Morrison evokes the fragile new freedom that Sethe experiences as the restoration of family and community.

However, implicit in this meditation on freedom is the burden of historical consciousness. It seems that the extent to which familial bonds can be mutually reclaimed by Sethe, Denver, and Paul D is the extent to which they mutually confront and interpret the past. The ghost of the murdered child loudly invites this opportunity, for as Ferguson notes, “what is commonly called the supernatural is also the manifestation of history” (113). In *Beloved*, the persistence of the supernatural signifies the black community’s need to sustain a hold on its history, its identity, and especially its kin. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that Beloved’s restless spirit is provoked by all expressions of human attachment and familial intimacy.

Beloved makes rigorous structural demands on readers and requires attention as close and exacting as Beloved herself requires from Sethe. The collective process of memory unfolds and is given shape with frequent tense shifts. The “action” of the novel alternates between past and present as fragments of stories, symbols, and codes are gathered and exchanged between characters. Also gathered are the different voices of all those who come into contact with the spirit of the murdered child. Individual identities begin to take shape as each character explores her or his relation to Beloved. Narrative point of view alternates through various re-memberings of the past. Imagistically dense stream-of-consciousness passages recall, in Beloved’s voice, the experience of crossing the ocean by ship. Her references to what seems to be the “middle passage” merge with references to birth. The conflation of these images suggests a continuous process of being born into the past. The “dark place” Beloved recalls evokes in the same instant the safety of the mother’s womb and the dismal bulk of the slave ships. The context of this passage is a series of first-person narratives similarly marked by opening declarations of affiliation to Beloved. The multiple points-of-view generated by generations of mothers and daughters seem to merge into one consciousness, yet at the same time they remain separate and autonomous voices. As the language and formal appearance of these passages become transformed into poetry, the women’s voices blend and mirror each other in their cadences of speech, phrases, and metaphors. Kinship is thus shown to be held together by an economy of symbols, a web of language that—like the family—is dismembered and fractured.

In *Beloved* family and language must be jointly reconstructed. Family is defined as a process of reading, a history of interpretive acts that are unique to each kinship group despite its ties to the larger cultural community. Claiming kin requires that one be able to share in a common language and read the symbols that constitute it. Under the system of slavery these fundamental structures of signification—the essential textuality of family—are suppressed, silenced, and even outlawed. When the signifying economies of enslaved

Africans were rendered worthless, so were their cultures and identities. When the freedom to make and exchange meanings is denied, the freedom to form and claim family is denied. However, Morrison suggests that the victims of slavery managed to preserve kinship structures through the study and interpretation of alternative textual forms. In this way, *Beloved* is about the painful process of reestablishing familial literacy. This process necessitates the creation of an amalgam formed of diverse cultural symbols. Decontextualized units of signification that survive slavery by virtue of courage and/or memory are thus combined with new symbols adopted from the dominant culture in the piecing together of a language with which to affirm kinship bonds.

Throughout the novel there is emphasis on these alternative texts that covertly preserve family unity and values. Trees, for example, are a recurrent image that Morrison deploys to symbolize hope for the restoration of familial security. When Paul D escapes from his imprisonment for the murder of his white master, Brandywine, he is instructed by the Cherokee Indians to follow the blossoming tree flowers to the North and to freedom:

“That way,” he said, pointing. “Follow the tree flowers,” he said. “Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone.”

So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear. . . . From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him. (112-13)

When Paul D first encounters the dreadful scar on Sethe’s back, the result of a brutal whipping, she describes it for him as Amy Denver had described it for her eighteen years earlier, as a chokecherry tree. At that moment it occurs to Paul D that what Sethe has on her back is

nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home. Always in the same place if he could, and choosing the place had been hard because Sweet Home had more pretty trees than any farm around. His choice he called Brother, and sat under it . . . (21)

Morrison establishes an ironic connection between Paul D’s invocation of fraternal intimacy and the brand that Sethe bears on her back as a relentless reminder of the perverse inhumanity that she was forced to endure. The scar on Sethe’s back tells its own story, which Paul D reads as if he were deciphering braille. “He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. . . . And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, ‘Aw, Lord, girl!’” (17). Like Keats’s Grecian urn, Sethe’s scar holds the past frozen in time. Her body is the text upon which history has been written and her only chance of reclaiming herself, for herself and her family, is to seize the power of interpretation, to suffer the past on her own terms.

The inscription on Sethe's back connects her to one of the few memories she has of her own mother. Sethe remembers that as a small child she was taught to recognize her mother by the brand with which she was marked as property:

Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This," and she pointed. "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark." (61)

In this way, Sethe is taught how to read kin, how to ascertain her own identity, and how to interpret the world around her. When Sethe asks her mother to "mark the mark on me too," she is immediately slapped across the face. Only years later does she understand why. To young Sethe, the cross within the circle is her family name, the only one she has ever been taught to recognize. Because she lacks this mark, she feels a lack of connection to her mother. But her mother knows what that brand really means in a system that commodifies, buys, and sells human life. It conveys the information that she is an extension of someone else's identity, a name that has become hers only as a result of profound dislocation, both external and internal.

The slap Sethe receives when she asks to be branded herself is meant to shock her into the recognition that, in a powerful sense, her people are not her people, and her beloved is not her beloved. My reiteration of the novel's biblical epigraph is meant to emphasize the essential fact that enslaved blacks were economically, psychologically, and *linguistically* blocked from passing on to future generations their names and symbolic orders. When Sethe begs for the brand, of course, she does not realize that she is asking to be given over to the system and marked as a piece of property. However, her mother's position is such that she can do no more than try to make passionately clear to Sethe the truth that Paul D echoes years later when he tells her, "You your own best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). Thus, on an abstract level, Sethe's mother's violent expression of mother-love anticipates the violence that Sethe will eventually be driven to inflict upon her own daughter: both women attempt, in other words, to save their children from the mark of slavery, to put them someplace where they'll be safe.

When she matures and chooses Halle to be her husband, Mrs. Garner, the wife of the self-styled "humanitarian" and master of Sweet Home, assumes the limited role of mother to Sethe. She gives her a pair of crystal earrings and turns a blind eye when Sethe steals some fabric to make herself a wedding dress. It is difficult not to see these small kindnesses as genuine acts, although it is equally difficult to ignore the fact that Mrs. Garner has far more to gain from her attachment to Sethe than Sethe does from her. Along these lines, Fields argues that "the mother-daughter relation [they] stitch together is inherently unstable because it cannot be upheld beyond the voluntary complicity of the two, and because nothing sustains it but their own separate desires." The relationship Mrs. Garner permits to exist between them is, in short, "a self-interested exchange" that joins slave-owner and slave together in a paradoxical alliance that is exploitative and yet contains rarefied elements of a genuine love and sense of connectedness (165-66). Ultimately, Mrs. Garner's

ministrations reflect the policy of her husband, who envisions Sweet Home as one thriving happy family, and himself the noble patriarch. This way, Garner promotes his superiority within the slave-holding community and indulges the fantasy that his “progeny” honor his authority, not because their lives are at stake, but because they are free to form attachments based on trust.

Schoolteacher represents an extreme embodiment of the logocentric assumption of the written word as constitutive of the domain of knowledge and truth. His fanatical abuses of power stress domination through the controlling authority of the logos. He symbolizes the distortions of knowledge that naturalize the “scientific” view that blacks are fundamentally inferior, perhaps even less human, than whites. In the name of education, he sustains and perpetuates an ideological construction—and here I refer to ideology in the Althusserian sense of its having a definite structural logic—of blacks as beasts of burden, as when Paul D is collared and given the bit. His assumed status as both master of the plantation and master of scientific discourse serves as his licence to conduct brutal experiments on Sethe, as when he instructs one of his nephews to hold Sethe down while the other nephew nurses at her breast.

Schoolteacher claims the discursive power to construct and withhold identity. Like Adam, he sees himself as the giver of the name; like the animals of Eden, he sees the enslaved blacks as the passive recipients of the name. Here it is useful to reference Morrison’s own meditation on the cultural devastation of this systematic hierarchy: “If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just *your* name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name?” (qtd. in Rubenstein 153). Thus, one of the more radical gestures of the enslaved subject is the destabilization of the racist hierarchy through the courageous act of self-appropriation and self-naming. The slave Joshua enacts this subversion when he renames himself “Stamp Paid,” thus signifying the extent of his sacrifice to the white man and his decision never to owe anything to anybody again.

Such signifying acts provide a basis, albeit fragile, for the establishment of an identity not dictated by the brands of slave-holders. The power of this connection, however, is experienced not simply in the rejection of the slave name, but in the exchange of stories that provide a context in which the name functions as an arbiter of history and identity. That Sethe’s stories can only be related in pieces, rather than in grand narrative fashion, suggests that any strengthening of the boundaries of self, or of kinship ties, must proceed by self-conscious acts of construction. Neither genealogical coherence nor totalizing narratives are intrinsic to her knowledge of origin. The instability occasioned by this fractured sense of self is inherited by subsequent generations. This is certainly implied when Denver first attempts to learn the alphabet from Lady Jones. Her efforts are aborted when Nelson Lord confronts her with a question about her mother’s crime. Significantly, the question comes when she is practicing how to write the letter “i.” Unable to answer his question, Denver quits school just when she would have mastered the mark that denotes “self.” She joins her mother, withdrawing into the haunted interior space of 124, leaving the little “i” and the written word behind.

Denver makes two important sacrifices when she walks out of Lady Jones’s classroom. She surrenders her connection to the surrounding community, and

so relinquishes its support. Also, she abandons her studies of the English alphabet and the written word, which, in the period of Reconstruction, represent freedom, whereas at Sweet Home they had meant certain death. The irony of this shift is doubled when we consider that by renouncing absorption into the dominant culture's logocentrism Denver also renounces the local community, which both she and her mother desperately need for nurturance and affirmation. Indeed, one of the salient themes of *Beloved* explores the vital correspondence between the establishment of the immediate familial "text" and the cooperation of the surrounding community. In a sense, Denver's attachment to family matters develops in accord with her embrace of the outside community. It is this mutually empowering exchange that finally makes it possible for Denver to "get a read" on her mother, and on the destructive voracity of her dead sister's spirit.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, when *Beloved's* ghost has been exorcised, Denver once again takes up the study of "book stuff" from Mrs. Bodwin, another white "schoolteacher." Denver's second bid for an education, and Paul D's concealed impulse to warn her—"Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (266)—intersect to form a lethal possibility that Morrison subtly invites readers to consider: a "white" education may represent, for Denver, another form of enslavement to the master culture. While the formal institution of slavery may have become obsolete, the systematic structure of racial oppression and its denial of African culture, identity, and history continues in the socially and morally sanctioned institutions of education and language. Indeed, in this context, Paul D's inability to read the newspaper article describing Sethe's act of infanticide may suggest not that he has been deceived by Sethe, nor that he is ill-equipped to make sense of the world around him, but that the "literate" culture's interpretation of her act is, and by necessity should remain, far removed from his own. When he learns of the episode from Stamp Paid, Paul D struggles less with the moral implications of the slaying than he does with the need to comprehend Sethe's decision in the terms appropriate to his own read on the past that he and Sethe share, and the future they may yet have.

This is what Paul D himself realizes when he tells Sethe that "he wants to put his story next to hers" (273). Given the novel's emphasis on stories as constitutive of familial bonds, these words can be understood as no less than a profound expression of a new configuration of family romance. It is here, at last, that Paul D is moved to claim kin, to commit to and honor not one woman, but the story they share. He thus enlists his participation in a multi-voiced process of deciphering and interpreting common experience. At last, Sethe's "story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again" (99).

What is paradoxical is that these stories are both life-sustaining and toxic. In the immediate aftershock of the baby's murder, Baby Suggs hands Sethe her living infant, Denver, to nurse. Too late, Baby Suggs notices that Sethe's nipple is covered in blood: "So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (152). In this powerful image, Morrison indicates that the post-Civil War black family was nourished by the combination of these essential elements: mother's milk, the blood of relations lost to the violent reality of slavery, and the stories that are passed down to each subsequent generation, even if they require raising the dead. For to be denied these stories is as poten-

tially debilitating as being denied food. Insofar as women have traditionally been responsible for these domestic labors, *Beloved* confirms the belief set forth by Mary Helen Washington, that “Women have been the caretakers in families, and that caretaking extends even to the stories of family history” (4).

Although some critics of the novel have focused attention on the conflict over Morrison’s depictions of men as weak, absent, or violent, and her depictions of women as too passively dependent on the men who leave and/or abuse them, it is important to note, I feel, that in *Beloved* struggles between the sexes remain latent by comparison to the larger struggle between the white-dominant culture’s interpretation of black history and the interpretations that blacks have pieced together from their own wealth of family stories and experiences. Although Sethe, Denver, and Beloved briefly form a version of the three-woman family that Morrison is alternately criticized and praised for, the women exclude male participation at the cost of Sethe’s health and community support. At the same time, critics such as McDowell reference the line from the novel that reads, “They were a family somehow and [Paul D] was not the head of it,” to show how Morrison validates the all-female household and undermines the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family (79). My own reading of the novel agrees with McDowell’s insofar as I would argue that Morrison affirms female strength and autonomy. However, I would argue this opposition is based on neither the portrayal of Sethe nor of Paul D, but on Morrison’s portrayal of Denver, who in the end emerges as the unlikely hero of the novel.

My case can be made simply: Denver achieves heroic status in the novel because it is she who finally finds the courage and means to cross the boundary that divides home from the world, or the private family from the public sphere. It is Denver who reaches out to the community for help. In accomplishing this she demonstrates one of the central assumptions of the novel: the family cannot survive in isolation but requires the strength and protection of a much wider network of “kinfolk.” By reestablishing this tie with the local community, Denver not only saves her mother’s life but also engages the powerful presence of the “thirty women” whose arrival at the climactic conclusion of the novel helps drive Beloved from 124. In this way, Denver represents hope for the future.

However, this hope is contingent on maintaining a link to the past. By saving her mother, Denver reconnects spiritually with her father, Halle. Just as Halle works to buy Baby Suggs’ freedom, Denver frees Sethe from enslavement to Beloved’s ravenous appetite for the mothering she never had. Thus, while Sethe retains a tie to her father in name only, Denver retains a tie to Halle through heroic action. Both father and daughter make use of what resources they can muster—beating the odds in both instances—in the interests of securing a future, and both pay a dear price for this opportunity: Halle gives up five years of Sundays, ironically a day when families often visit. Denver puts an end to her sister’s visitation, sacrificing their camaraderie, in favor of reestablishing the essential reciprocal tie that defines family as a network of “kinfolks.”

Undeniably, Beloved’s presence among the living prefigures their recognition of a communal loss that can only be mended by a communal effort to restore lost ties. But Beloved also functions as a persistent reminder of the unique loss suffered by each occupant of 124. Ultimately, what defines Beloved in the context of familial relationships that the novel explores is that she

assumes the shape of something slightly different to all who embrace her. She is their worst fear and their most profound need combined. For Denver, who has suffered not only the loss of a sister's companionship but the judgment and neglect of the community as well, Beloved is the "interested, uncritical eyes of the other" (118). To Paul D, Beloved is his "shame," or the utter depth of inhumanity and demoralization he experienced at Sweet Home when he was colared and given the bit. Beloved drives Paul D to reencounter this moment—which he has long since locked away in his heart—when she seduces him sexually and ultimately forces him out of the house. Beloved brings him face to face with his past by reducing him to a position of base functioning in which he is helpless. She thus "fixes" him, or literally takes possession of him, like the bit in his mouth and the concealed misery in his heart. As a result, Paul D abandons 124 and withdraws to the damp basement of a local church where, like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he descends underground for a time.

For Sethe, Beloved's return is an opportunity to do over again what she had not been able to do before: to be a mother, to forge the experiential connections known as family. But the past can neither be changed nor forgotten, only internally confronted and externally shared through the telling and exchanging of stories. So why then the echoing of the final line, "This is not a story to pass on"? Perhaps this is a warning that the cycle of separation and loss must not be repeated. Paradoxically, however, it seems that the only way to prevent the repetition of such tragically severed human bonds is to transform loss into life through the creation of narrative. These stories are told and retold in order to reach some understanding of what may be lost, and how, so that freedom in its fullest sense may be attained. *Beloved* is a novel that reminds us that true "freedom," for the post-Civil War black family, was not freedom from the southern plantation, nor freedom by means of an emancipation proclamation, but freedom "To get to a place where you could love anything you chose" (162).

Indeed, *Beloved* may not be a story to pass on, but it is a story that had to be told so that a healing process could begin, and so that family and community could be mutually restored. The process of restoration, like the making of myths, is a culturally-specific process insofar as both are social constructs that no two persons will experience in precisely the same way. Morrison's novel asks us to consider the possibility that Sethe's impulse to infanticide—based on her own interpretation of history—is in its own context a valid act of courage and familial preservation. Sethe insists that all she wanted to do was put her baby someplace safe, and she did. For some families, there is a death that is safer than life, and there is a love powerful enough to bridge the distance.

NOTES

¹I refer here to information provided by Erlene Stetson in "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave" (71). For a more complete historical account of the black family under slavery and during the Reconstruction era see Gutman.

²In their spurious effort to contain all social and emotional exchange within the family unit, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in some ways resemble family groupings depicted in other works by Morrison, for instance the Breedloves from *The Bluest Eye*, who Rubenstein argues "survive at the very fringe of society, where the 'hem' begins to unrav-

el,” and where “economic destitution and psychic abjection undermine the very bonds that attach family members to one another and form the basis for community” (129).

³Deborah Horvitz, for example, has painstakingly described the novel’s exploration of “matrilineal ancestry and the relationships among enslaved, freed, alive, and dead mothers and daughters” (157).

⁴Horvitz sees *Beloved* as symbolic of black women’s collective memory. According to Horvitz, *Beloved* speaks across generations of Africans and African slaves in the U. S., thus creating “the crucial link that connects Africa and America for the enslaved women. She is Sethe’s mother; she is Sethe herself; she is her daughter” (163-64).

⁵The bringing together of extreme opposites, the pathos of change and renewal, references the Bakhtinian vision of carnival as a popular impulse that is ultimately “about freedom, the courage needed to establish it, the cunning required to maintain it, and—above all—the horrific ease with which it can be lost” (Holquist xxi).

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