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Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*

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TONI MORRISON'S *Beloved* is haunted by history, memory, and a specter that embodies both; yet it would be accurate to say that *Beloved* is haunted by the history and memory of rape specifically. While Morrison depicts myriad abuses of slavery like brutal beatings and lynchings, the depictions of and allusions to rape are of primary importance; each in some way helps explain the infanticide that marks the beginnings of Sethe's story as a free woman.¹ Sethe kills her child so that no white man will ever "dirty" her, so that no young man with "mossy teeth" will ever hold the child down and suck her breasts (251, 70). Of all the memories that haunt Morrison's characters, those that involve sexual abuse and exploitation hold particular power: rape is the trauma that forces Paul D to lock his many painful memories in a "tobacco tin" heart (113), that Sethe remembers more vividly than the beating that leaves a tree of scars on her back, that destroys Halle's mind, and against which Ella measures all evil.

I say that the book is haunted by rape not to pun idly on the ghostly presence that names the book but to establish the link between haunting and rape that invigorates the novel's dominant trope: the succubus figure.² The character Beloved is not just the ghost of Sethe's dead child; she is a succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen.³ The succubus figure, which is related to the vampire, another sexualized figure that drains a vital fluid, was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shape-shifting witches who "ride" their terrified victims in the night (Puckett 568),⁴ and *Beloved* embodies the qualities of that figure as well. In separate assaults, Beloved drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality; symptomatically, Beloved's body swells as she also feeds off her victims' horrible memories of and recurring nightmares about sexual violations that occurred in their enslaved past. But Beloved functions as more than the receptacle of remembered stories; she reenacts sexual violation and thus figures the persistent nightmares common to survivors of trauma.⁵ Her insistent manifestation constitutes a challenge for the characters who

have survived rapes inflicted while they were enslaved: directly, and finally communally, to confront a past they cannot forget. Indeed, it is apparent forgetting that subjects them to traumatic return; confrontation requires a direct attempt at remembering.

Morrison uses the succubus figure to represent the effects of institutionalized rape under slavery. When the enslaved persons' bodies were violated, their reproductive potential was commodified. The succubus, who rapes and steals semen, is metaphorically linked to such rapes and to the exploitation of African Americans' reproduction. Just as rape was used to dehumanize enslaved persons, the succubus or vampire's assault robs victims of vitality, both physical and psychological. By representing a female rapist figure and a male rape victim, Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining domination or subjection to rape.

History and Collective Memory: "The Serious Work of Beating Back the Past"

Two memories of rape that figure prominently in the novel echo the succubus's particular form of sexual assault. The narrator refers several times to the incident in which two "mossy-toothed" boys (70) hold Sethe down and suck her breast milk (6, 16–17, 31, 68–70, 200, 228). No less important, Paul D works on a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, where prisoners are forced to fellate white guards every morning (107–09, 229). In addition, Ella is locked up and repeatedly raped by a father and son she calls "the lowest yet" (119, 256), and Stamp Paid's wife, Vashti, is forced into sex by her enslaver (184, 232). Baby Suggs is compelled to have sex with a straw boss who later breaks his coercive promise not to sell her child (23) and again with an overseer (144). Sethe's mother is "taken up many times by the crew" during the Middle Passage (62), as are many other enslaved women (180). And three women in the novel—Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs, and Ella—refuse to nurse babies conceived through rape. Other allusions to sexual violation include the Sweet Home men's dreams of rape (10, 11), Sethe's explanation for adopting the mysterious Beloved—her fears that white men will "jump on" a homeless, wandering black girl (68)—and the neighborhood suspicion that Beloved is the

black girl rumored to have been imprisoned and sexually enslaved by a local white man who has recently died (119, 235). There are also acts of desperate prostitution that are akin to rape: Sethe's exchange of sex for the engraving on her baby's tombstone (4–5, 184) and the Saturday girls' work at the slaughterhouse (203).

These incidents of rape frame Sethe's explanation for killing her baby daughter. Sethe tries to tell the furious Beloved that death actually protected the baby from the deep despair that killed Baby Suggs, from "what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble" (251): horrific experiences and memories of rape. Whites do "not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you," Sethe tells Beloved, "Dirty you so bad you [can't] like yourself anymore." Sethe passionately insists that she protected her beloved daughter and also herself from "undreamable dreams" in which "a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of the wagon" (251). For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and "dirtied" by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape.

Sethe is haunted by the ghost of the child she has killed; Beloved's return to life corresponds to the return of many of Sethe's painful repressed memories of her enslaved past. Memory is figured as a menacing force in Sethe's life—it seems to stalk her—and she works hard to avoid it. She sees her future as "a matter of keeping the past at bay" and begins each day with the "serious work of beating back the past" (42, 73). As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "[P]atients suffering from traumatic neurosis" are not "much occupied in their waking lives with memories. . . . Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it [the traumatic event]" (Caruth 61). Cathy Caruth, in a reading of Freud, argues that such unsuccessful effort is at the center of traumatic experience. Trauma is the event survived, but it is also defined by "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (59), often in the form of hallucinations and nightmares. Traumatic nightmares make the painful event available to a consciousness that could not initially assimilate or "know" it (4). Sethe is traumatized

both by the past and by the present task of surviving it. For Caruth, the core of trauma stories is the “oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Sethe’s infanticide manifests that correlative crisis as certainly as any story of trauma can: she has survived what she prevents her daughter from surviving.

Beloved, like the repressed, returns against Sethe’s will, and when she arrives, she is hungry for more than her mother’s love and attention. She has an insatiable appetite, a “thirst for hearing” the “remembered” stories that animate her ghostly frame, a hunger for the voicing of the unspeakable. As Sethe discloses, “everything” in her past life is “painful or lost,” and she and Baby Suggs have tacitly agreed “that it [is] unspeakable” (58). Sethe has never told these stories to Denver or Paul D, but she willingly shares them with Beloved, who feeds on a diet of Sethe’s past and serves as the materialization of Sethe’s memory.

Beloved also acts as a catalyst for Paul D’s recollection of his past. Although she has no particular knowledge of his past, his contact with her brings unpleasant memories to the surface of his consciousness. As Paul D says, Beloved “reminds me of something; something, look like, I’m supposed to remember” (234). Despite the characters’ efforts to diffuse the power of the past, the ghost baby, like the traumatic nightmare, intrudes on the present, forcing Sethe and Paul D to remember what they have tried unsuccessfully to forget.

Beloved represents African American history or collective memory as much as she does Sethe’s or Paul’s individual memory.⁶ The narrative merges Beloved’s memories of death with the histories of women who endured the Middle Passage, where the institutionalized rape of enslaved women began. Both Sethe’s mother and her mother’s friend Nan are violated en route to North American slavery. Beloved remembers and recounts their horror: “dead men lay on top of her. . . . [S]he had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (241).

Morrison has explained in an interview that Beloved speaks “the language of both experiences, death and the Middle Passage” in this section and

that the language “is the same” for both (“Realm” 6). But *Beloved* is also speaking a revised language of rape structured by the historical narratives of rape in slavery. In *Beloved*’s language *white* and *black* are nouns rather than modifiers. Largely about men and women, the available idiom of rape in American culture has obfuscated the centrality of race. For instance, there is no widely recognizable story of white men’s rape of black women, and narratives of homosexual rape are even less visible when the victim is black. The only recognizable narrative of interracial rape is what Angela Davis has called “the myth of the black rapist” (172).

Morrison powerfully narrates the rape of black women and of black men by white enslavers. As Morrison has commented, slave narratives are often silent about “proceedings too terrible to relate” (Henderson 63). Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is notable for taking sexual exploitation as its explicit subject, and Morrison gestures toward Jacobs’s text by violently articulating the history Jacobs delicately describes (Keenan 56). Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality.

Beloved embodies the recurrent experience of a past that the community of women in the novel wants to forget. The women take responsibility for exorcizing Beloved, but Ella, whose life has been irrevocably marked by “the lowest yet,” is the most determined to eradicate the violation Beloved represents. Ella has refused to nurse a baby conceived through rape; that child represents a monstrous sign of past horror, and Ella staunchly maintains that such horrors must not intrude on the community’s present. Yet through Beloved the women also confront their memories and wounded histories. This attempt to know the incomprehensible trauma done to them is a step toward healing.⁷ I say “a step” because Beloved never definitively leaves, not even at the end of the novel. Characters continue to encounter traces of her—footprints that “come and go,” the sound of skirts rustling, and the sensation of “knuckles brushing [their] cheek[s]” as they wake from sleep (275). The insistent crisis of trauma is “truly gone. Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes.” But Beloved is more than her manifestation. What she represents is always there to be

survived. Significantly, “Ella is not so sure” that Beloved is not “waiting for another chance” (263).

“Like a Bad Dream”: Beloved and Supernatural Assault

At the end of the novel, Beloved seems to disappear, and the townspeople forget her “like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep” (275)—indeed, like a nightmare. In *On the Nightmare* Ernest Jones outlines the derivation of the word *nightmare* from the Anglo-Saxon word for “succubus” or “incubus,” *mara*. Jones notes that “from the earliest times the oppressing agency experienced during sleep was personified” (243). Before the community forgets Beloved “like a bad dream,” Paul D and Sethe experience her as a sexually menacing nightmare figure (274). After Paul D is forced out of Sethe’s bed and from room to room, Beloved visits him in the cold house. He tries to resist her sexual coercion, and he is frightened when she lifts her skirts and pronounces, “You have to touch me. On the inside part.” He silently lists the things he must not do if he is to be safe (117). When Paul D does reach the inside part, the act is described as occurring against his will. He finds himself “fucking her when he [is] convinced he [doesn’t] want to” (126). He says there is “nothing he [is] able to do about it” though “he trie[s]” (126). He imagines telling Sethe, “[I]t ain’t a weakness, the kind of weakness I can fight ’cause something is happening to me, that girl is doing it . . . she is doing it to me. Fixing me. Sethe, she’s fixed me and I can’t break it” (127). Near the end of the novel, Paul D remembers this nightmarish experience, but in “daylight he can’t imagine it. . . . Nor the desire that drowned him there and forced him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea. . . . It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive.” He had “no more control over it than over his lungs” (264). The visitation scene ends with Paul D crying out so that he wakes Denver and then himself (117). He survives, and he wakes from his sexual assault as if from a nightmare.

Beloved attacks her mother, Sethe, in a form that more closely resembles that of a vampire. “The Vampire superstition,” Jones writes, “is evidently closely allied to that of the Incubus and Succubus. . . . Just

as Incubi suck out vital fluids and thus exhaust the victim . . . so do Vampires often lie on the breast and induce suffocation” (125). The vampire is “a blood-sucking ghost or re-animated body of a dead person; a soul or re-animated body of a dead person believed to come from the grave and wander about by night sucking the blood of persons asleep, causing their death” (98). Beloved is the reanimated body of Sethe’s murdered baby, and she metaphorically drains Sethe’s vitality.

Within moments of being discovered at 124 by Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, Beloved drinks glass after glass of water as water correspondingly gushes from Sethe in a supernatural birthing. The connection between Sethe’s body and Beloved’s is also evident at the novel’s end—Beloved ingests while Sethe is drained. Like the “mossy-toothed” boys who assault Sethe in the barn, Beloved also sucks Sethe dry. Although Sethe is initially thrilled to realize that Beloved is her dead daughter returned, she and Beloved soon enter into a struggle for survival, “rationing their strength to fight each other” (239)—a struggle that Beloved seems to win. As Sethe grows so thin that the flesh between her forefinger and thumb fades, Beloved eats all the best food and grows a “basket-fat” stomach (243). Beloved animates her ghostly flesh with food but also with Sethe’s life: “Beloved [eats] up [Sethe’s] life, [takes] it, swell[s] up with it, gr[ows] taller on it” (250).

Like the succubus, the vampire drains its victims of fluid in an attack with sexual resonances. H. Freimark writes, “Though it is not an absolute rule, still it can be observed that in most cases women are constantly visited by male Vampires, and men by female ones. . . . The sexual features characterize the Vampire belief as another form of the Incubus-Succubus belief—it is true, a more dangerous one” (Jones 125).⁸ The vampire trope is usually played out in the heterosexual paradigm of the earlier nightmare figures, but the vampire figure in *Beloved* enacts an incestuous, homosexual desire. Paul D remarks that Beloved is constantly aroused, but he knows she is not “shining” for him. Rather, her appetite is for Sethe, who is “licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (57). Beloved tells Paul D, “You can go but she is the one I have to have” (76). Sethe experiences Beloved’s attentions as a night visitation: Sethe is “sliding into sleep when she [feels] Beloved

touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire" (58). When *Beloved* kisses Sethe's neck in the clearing, Sethe is transfixed but suddenly becomes aware that the act is inappropriate. Perhaps she also senses the danger of a kiss on the neck as a prefiguration of a vampiric attack. This haunting is marked by an infantile sexual desire for the mother, as Sethe's reprimand suggests: "You too old for that" (98).

As *Beloved* drains Paul D and Sethe, her animated ghostly frame becomes an embodiment of the traumatic past and the embodied threat of that past's intrusion on the future. By the end of the novel, *Beloved* has "taken the shape of a pregnant woman" (261), a manifestation that derives from the medieval belief that "a succubus, or demon masquerading as a voluptuous woman, molested men, while an incubus, a demon masquerading as a man, molested women." It was thought that the two could work in tandem to impregnate sleeping women: "Though sterile, the incubi were said to be able to impregnate women with semen collected from the nocturnal emissions of men" (Guiley 92). In Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), "The divell plaieth *Succubus* to the man and carrieth from him the seed of generation, which he delivereth as *Incubus* to the woman" (*OED*, s.v. *succubus*). *Beloved*, who plays succubus and incubus, collects sperm from Paul D to impregnate herself, then uses the life force of her mother's body to sustain her spawn. When Ella and the neighborhood women come to drive out the "devil-child," they notice her "belly protruding like a winning watermelon" (250). An effect of heterosexual assault on Paul D, *Beloved*'s pregnancy is a figure for one function of rape in slavery: multiplying human beings as property. But the pregnancy also means that the past of rape threatens to intrude on the future. *Beloved*'s child would represent for the community of women something they wish to exorcize, something they will not tolerate in the future—the memory of children forced on their bodies in the past.

"Mossy Teeth, an Appetite": Sexual Violence, Sucking, and Sustenance

Like *Beloved*, the other rapists in Morrison's novel attempt to annihilate their victims—sexual violence

is figured as eating one's victim up. *Beloved* embodies the particular violations Sethe and Paul D have suffered, violations characterized by sucking (being sucked or being forced to suck). Through this trope of eating, which links sexual violence with vampirism, a human being becomes the source of another's sustenance. The link to the institution of slavery is clear.

The first assault in the novel, which Sethe tries to forget, appears as a "picture of the men coming to nurse her" (6). The boys cruelly mock the maternal associations of nursing by treating Sethe as an animal to be milked. They enact an assault of the kind perpetrated by alps, the German nightmare figures that suck milk rather than semen or blood (Jones 119). In recollection, Sethe expresses the horror of this violence, which, as the loss of a life-sustaining fluid, prefigures and even structures *Beloved*'s vampiric attack. In other references to rape, Sethe often speaks of appetite. When the white girl Amy finds her lying in the wild onion field and approaches her, Sethe believes she is about to be discovered by another white boy with "mossy teeth, an appetite" (31). And when Sethe has sex with the engraver to pay for the name on her baby's gravestone, the engraver's son looks on, "the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new" (5).

The eating imagery associated with Sethe's rape reappears in the morning ritual of Alfred, Georgia, where prisoners are forced to fellate prison guards. After the prisoners line up, they must kneel and wait "for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it" (107). That whim is announced with taunts such as "Breakfast? Want some breakfast nigger?" and "Hungry, nigger?" which deflect the guards' appetite onto the prisoners and force the prisoners to name it as their own in their reply: "Yes sir" (107, 108). Lee Edelman argues in *Homographesis* that by forcing the prisoners to express homosexual desire, the guards symbolically "castrate" them. This violence is both racist and homophobic: "white racists (literally) castrate others while homosexuals (figuratively) are castrated themselves" (56). Edelman argues that this scene, where the prisoners are marked with homosexuality, figures the "violent disappropriation of masculine authority that underlies the paranoid relation of black and white in our mod-

ern, ‘racially’ polarized, patriarchal social formation” (54).

In racist American culture the black man signifies the “hole,” the “absence of all that constitutes manhood,” and thus social domination of black men is often figured as sexual domination of black men by white men (53). This conflation of sexual and racial domination is a product of a prevailing definition of black masculinity as interchangeable with black male sexuality. When black masculinity is not called on to signify excessive virility, it paradoxically often suggests emasculation or social impotence. This discursive formation partly dictates the form of the prisoners’ violation. Symptomatically, the prisoners are emasculated by passive homosexuality—they are forced to “go down” (54), to express their social subordination as desire for penetration, and to assume the “faggot” identity (56). The degradation of being forced to voice desire for one’s own rape echoes in Paul D’s terrible experience of Beloved. He says he is humiliated by her power to move him from Sethe’s bed and by his own uncontrollable “appetite” for her (126).

In Morrison’s novel, even a satisfied appetite has negative connotations. When Paul tells Sethe about Halle’s breakdown, she likens contemplating painful information to gorging:

I just ate and can’t hold another bite[.] I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down. . . . I am still full of that, God damn it, I can’t go back and add more. (70)

Fullness is dangerous for Sethe. During the beating she bites her tongue and fears that she may “eat [herself] up,” finishing the job that the boys have started (202). When she imagines that she is about to be discovered by a “hungry” white boy, she thinks of biting him, eating him violently: “I was hungry . . . just as hungry as I could be for his eyes. I couldn’t wait. . . . [S]o I thought . . . , I’m gonna eat his feet off. . . . I was hungry to do it. Like a snake. All jaws and hungry” (31). Sethe links appetite with the desire to annihilate, figuring the attack she plans and her own violation in the same terms.

“The Last of the Sweet Home Men”: Manhood and Naming

When Paul D realizes the sexual punishment he will suffer on the chain gang, he vomits. Earlier, after an aborted escape attempt, he has endured the horror of being forced to suck an iron bit. These experiences are two of the horrible contents sealed in the tobacco tin Paul D substitutes for his heart. He does not want anyone to get a “whiff of [the tin’s] contents” because such a disclosure would “shame him” (73). Thus he places his painful memories “one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he [gets] to 124 nothing in this world [can] pry it open” (113).

But Beloved is not of “this world,” and she has the power to force the box open by traumatizing Paul D. Valerie Smith argues that “the act of intercourse with Beloved restores Paul D to himself, restores his heart to him” (348). Late in the novel Paul does express a bewildered and confused gratitude, but what Smith calls a “bodily cure” (348) I view as rape. And yet without this nightmare experience, Paul D would not be able to overcome his numbing defense mechanisms or perform the necessary exorcism. Beloved forces Paul D to reexperience sexual violation; ironically, he might heal if he can assimilate the previously unknowable trauma. Because of the humiliation of succumbing to Beloved, Paul D confronts the pain that he has locked away. As he nears climax, the tobacco tin bursts open and he cries out, “Red heart. Red heart. Red heart” (117). As much as it hurts to feel his heart again, he needs it if he is to love. Unfortunately, Paul D’s attempted “incorporation of trauma into a meaningful (and thus sensible) story” does not promote healing.

The subordination Paul D experiences at Beloved’s hands, at Sweet Home, and on the chain gang tests his conviction of his own masculinity. He is the only principal character who must deal with two forced sexual encounters, and these encounters are central to his constant meditation on the meaning of his manhood. Paul D is introduced as “the last of the Sweet Home men” (6). Garner, the master of Sweet Home, brags about his “men,” but the term seems to be a self-fulfilling designation for the men’s productivity. Thus encouraged

by Garner, they work hard to make the plantation more productive and thus to make him more prosperous. With the exception of Sixo, the Sweet Home men take pride in their name until they learn, after Garner's death, that they are "only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home" (125). Though free, Paul D continues to ask, "Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?" and to wonder whether Garner was "naming what he saw or creating what he did not" (125, 220). Paul D is certain that Sixo and Halle are men regardless of Garner, but "concerning his own manhood, he [can] not satisfy himself on that point" (220).

Paul D believes that he cannot stop Beloved's assault because he is not "man enough to break out." He needs Sethe even though "it shame[s] him to have to ask the woman he want[s] to protect to help him" (127). But the shame is too great, and rather than ask for help he reverts to anxious assertions of his masculinity. Instead of explaining, "I am not a man," he tells Sethe he wants her pregnant with his child: "suddenly it was a solution: a way to hold onto her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell" (128). The connection is clear—he must "document his manhood" because he is a victim of a supernatural rape that he feels has emasculated him just as the guards in Alfred, Georgia, have.

Paul D and his fellow prisoners must choose between saying "yes sir" and death, but they articulate the choice as a choice between manhood and impotence. Stamp Paid says that he "hand[s] over" his wife, Vashti, "in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded that he stay alive" (184–85). But in fact he had no power to offer or deny her body to the white man who enslaved them both. Halle, who sees the attack on Sethe from the loft, is in a similar quandary. He does not fight the attackers, because he hopes to escape with his family. Like Paul D and Stamp, Halle is rendered powerless and ostensibly passive, and Paul D and Stamp both view that position as emasculating. Because the conceptual categories and language Paul D and Stamp know for masculinity cannot account for men oppressed by slavery, both consider their powerlessness a sign of their failure as men. Furthermore, Paul D has been raped, and he cannot speak of that experience in a language

that does not account for the sexually victimized male body or that casts that body as feminized. Though he is victimized as a black man in a racist system, he articulates his sexually subordinate position in terms of gender. Thus he struggles alone in the church basement with painful feelings and memories, but he will never be able to confront them publicly or with the help of the community because his shame as a male rape victim is too great. He cannot join the community of women that finally challenges and exorcizes Beloved and what she represents, and his violation remains unspeakable or incomprehensible.

Notably, critics who do refer to Paul D's experience of rape are also confounded by the "unspeakability" of his story, and many write of his violation euphemistically if at all. Although Paul D is distressed by Beloved and unwilling to have sex with her, the incident, because of its supernatural quality, is not easily recognizable as rape, a term bound by legal definitions. But critics treat even Paul D's experience on the chain gang as unrelatable. Valerie Smith describes Paul D as having "endured the hardships of the chain gang" (346); Marilyn Sanders Mobley refers to the "atrocities such as working on the chain gang" (193); Sally Keenan mentions the "story of the prison farm" as something Paul D cannot speak aloud (68). Mae Henderson acknowledges that the boys' assault on Sethe is her primary violation but equates the assault with Paul D's experience of wearing the horse's bit in his mouth, neglecting to mention the final trauma to his hurting heart—"breakfast" in Alfred, Georgia.

Paul D's experience is unrelatable because it exceeds American understandings of rape and gender, but it is also unspeakable because it is dehumanizing. Morrison challenges Paul D's and Stamp's conceptions by emphasizing that Halle's destruction goes beyond his destruction as a man. Halle is reduced to utter madness. When Paul D sees him for the last time, Halle is sitting at the churn, his face smeared with butter—a substance associated with his wife's stolen milk and indicating Halle's relational identification with his family. Halle is primarily a human being who loves, not specifically a man. When Paul D recounts being shackled with a bit in his mouth, he tries to explain to Sethe that the greatest humiliation of all was "walking past the

roosters looking at them look at me" (71). Paul D believes that the cock, which, significantly, is named Mister, has smiled at him. This episode makes Paul D feel that he is "something else" and that "that something [is] less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (72). Because Paul D recognizes Mister as nothing more than a chicken, the scene is unequivocally one of dehumanization rather than of emasculation.⁹ Moreover, Paul D understands that the guards in Alfred, Georgia, are "not even embarrassed by the knowledge that without gunshot fox would laugh at them" (162). Morrison suggests that both rapist and victim are dehumanized—the victim left feeling reduced as a human being, the rapist aligned with the animal.

Reinventing the Discourse of Gender and Rape

Beloved explodes the dichotomies not only, as Valerie Smith argues, "between life and afterlife, living and dead, oral and written, self and other, and so on" (350) but also between male and female, rapist and victim. Morrison challenges the idea that sexually subjected bodies fall within clear gender and heterosexual parameters. In reworking Harriet Jacobs's text, Morrison suggests that sexual exploitation is not only the black woman's story of slavery. The gendered discourse of rape, as well as feminist literary criticism that has sought to recover women's lost texts and stories, has unwittingly veiled Paul D's brutalization. Moreover, it seems inconceivable for Beloved to figure as a female rapist because twentieth-century notions of women and rapists exclude the assaultive agency of the succubus (see Elliot). Morrison foregrounds the variability and historicism of the gendered discourse of rape and thus the mutability of seemingly entrenched conceptualizations.

Beloved serves as a powerful reminder that rape was and often still is a racial issue, that it is not, as Susan Brownmiller has asserted, "a process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear" (15).¹⁰ While *male* and *female* do not formulaically describe rapist and victim in the novel, *white* and *black* almost always do. Beloved is a black perpetrator, but she embodies memories of whites' assaults on blacks. Morrison depicts rape as a process by which some white men keep

some black women and even some black men in a state of fear. In this way, she constructs a discourse for the rape of black women and men that has been largely absent in twentieth-century America and thus asserts the complex and various powers that structure rape.¹¹

In the novel, free African American men and women have survived rape and slavery, but they are not free of the recurrent experience of trauma. They can neither contain nor repress their memories, and hence survival is, as Caruth says, a kind of crisis. However, the novel suggests that the community might survive at least a gradually mitigating crisis. Once Beloved emerges from the darkness of private dreams and becomes a communal memory, only traces of her remain. Indeed, the last paragraph of the novel claims that "by and by all trace is gone." Yet the closing sentences carry those denied traces. Morrison writes that "the rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for . . . certainly no clamor for a kiss." These deliberate negations are mobilized against a persisting presence. Similarly, the narration repeatedly insists, "[T]hey forgot her," the repetition signaling that the memories can never be "disremembered and unaccounted for" (275). Ella warns that Beloved "[c]ould be hiding in the trees waiting for another chance" (263), and the novel's conclusion suggests that Beloved will get that chance should the community fail to realize that forgetting, not communal memory, is the condition of traumatic return.

Notes

I thank Trudier Harris for commenting on several drafts of this essay and for the inspired suggestion that I consider Beloved as a succubus and rapist figure. I also thank Andrew Cousins, Jodi Cressman, John Jones, Catherine Nickerson, Julie Abraham, and Angelika Bammer. Above all, I am grateful to Nicole Cooley for offering insight and support at every stage of the writing.

¹Criticism on the novel has focused largely on Beloved's relation to memory and history. See esp. Smith; Mobley.

²While some critics have compared Beloved to a succubus or vampire in passing, Trudier Harris alone focuses on Beloved as a demonic figure who feeds off Paul D and Sethe. According to Harris, Beloved enacts vengeance against those who would thwart her desire for her mother: against Sethe herself and

against Paul D, who tries to exorcize the house. Harris depicts a contest between Paul D's masculine power and Beloved's feminine otherness, which is represented by her insatiable desire. In fact, Harris argues that Sethe is masculine insofar as motherhood is a "symbol of authority almost masculine in its absoluteness." Thus Beloved's life-threatening feeding aims to usurp Sethe's and Paul D's masculine sense of entitlement to "power over life and death" (158). Although Harris does not treat Beloved's attacks as enactments of sexual violence, she suggested that I do so.

³One type included in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian classifications of demons is the "night terror, female demons that attack sleeping men, children and women in childbed to suck them of their vitality and blood" (Guiley 92). The vampire and the old hag are forms of the night terror.

⁴In *American Folklore*, Richard M. Dorson writes that "the shape shifting witches who straddle their victims in bed are English not African creations" (185). Newbell Niles Puckett records the belief in these figures in a 1926 collection, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. Regardless of their origins, the figures appear in African American literature, notably in Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899): "en dey say she went out ridin' de niggers at night, fer she wuz a witch 'sides bein' a cunjuh 'oman" (15).

⁵In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). This repetition is a response to the sudden and "unassimilated nature" of the event. In nightmares the trauma experience is made available to the consciousness that could not initially "know" it (4).

⁶Although Morrison names Sethe's other children—Denver, Howard, and Buglar—she never calls the dead girl anything but Beloved, a name that recalls the liturgy for marriage and burial. Thus Morrison suggests that this character stands not only for a particular individual but also for the community that both mourns and celebrates individuals and community life.

⁷Caruth, who holds that trauma must be recognized as beyond knowing if "witnessing" is to take place, argues for a hermeneutics that allows the effect of the "not fully conscious address" and for a "departure from sense and understanding" (24, 56). While Caruth provides a way of reading trauma, she does not discuss ways in which trauma victims might therapeutically retell their own stories. She does note, however, that trauma therapists such as Jodie Wigren view narrative completion—the process by which a survivor creates a meaningful story that includes the originally unknowable trauma—as integral to successful treatment (Caruth 117n8). My notion that the characters in Morrison's novel might have successfully confronted Beloved and their past memories relies on the idea that healing requires conscious meaning making about what is inherently incomprehensible.

⁸Freimark exhaustively catalogs instances of the belief in sexual intercourse between mortals and supernatural beings (Jones 124).

⁹Of course, this dehumanization also extends to enslaved black women, who are defined as commodities or "broodmares."

While his nephews violate Sethe's body, schoolteacher sits nearby, filling a notebook with his definitions of the "animal" and human characteristics of those enslaved at Sweet Home. His words relegate black people to subhuman status; thus, in Sethe's infanticide, he sees a "mishandled" and rebelling "creature," not a tragic manifestation of mother love (150).

¹⁰Morrison's fictional challenge echoes the work of black feminists such as Angela Davis who argue that the history of rape and lynching of blacks must be fully accounted for in any thorough and responsible study of rape.

¹¹See Kimberle Crenshaw's argument that Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment were rejected partly because of the absence of a narrative about the rape of black women and because of a dominant coding of the black female body as libidinous. Crenshaw asserts that rape is the primary trope of feminist resistance but that it has been mobilized for white women. Hill could not appropriate this trope, whereas Clarence Thomas could easily exploit the trope of antiracist resistance—lynching.

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