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Beloved, She's Ours

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Beloved, She's Ours

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.¹
(Morrison 1993, 27)

In her Nobel Prize speech, Toni Morrison retells an old story found in many cultures—that of an old woman, blind, wise, (in the contemporary African American version, the daughter of slaves), who is presented by young people with a riddle: “Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.” In her meditation on language, Morrison chooses to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer. In her retelling of this old tale, Morrison reiterates concerns at the center of her writing: the meaning of language, its liberating as well as its destructive possibilities.

One of Morrison's most distinctive narrative qualities is her ability to bring together in her writings both the political/social context and the nuances of the subjective landscape within which African Americans have had to and have chosen to decipher the meaning of freedom. Seen from this perspective, some might see Morrison as an intellectual contradiction. On one hand she is very much rooted in the African American *tradition*, and I use that word on purpose, in that issues of freedom, ownership and love have, of necessity, been seen as identity politics, as being situated in this group's specific social and historical experiences.² On the other hand, she is very much a postmodernist writer in that she resists the overwhelming definition of a racial or gendered group as monolithic.³ At the same time, some might claim her to be a bourgeois intellectual in that she is very much a novelist. By that I mean that she claims the individual as self, as having a clarity of boundaries that declares that self to be a self. Morrison defies labels for her opus, beautifully illuminating that the concept of freedom is not a static one. Particularly in the U. S., because

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of its unique history (that of chattel slavery and capitalist democracy), freedom and therefore our definitions of art have always been related to ownership

Beloved, Morrison's fifth novel, interrogates our assumptions about literary narrative in the bourgeois Western tradition. It raises questions about the intersections of our orthodox notions of freedom and limits, of individual agency and society, of ownership and excess, presence and absence, the past and the present, the living and the dead. As many critics have noted, *Beloved's* form is as old as the oldest storytelling, even as it is postmodern in its play on fragmentation, absence, negation.⁴ In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison blurs the distinction between that which is old and that which is new:

I am not experimental, I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books—the something that defines what makes a book “black.” And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not. The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being imagined within a framework. (McKay 152–53)

As well, Morrison's novels codify and interrogate philosophical traditions outside of the West, at the very moment when such postcolonial points of view are rearing their heads in Western educational institutions and in our popular culture. They engage two major Western European theoretical schools of the twentieth-century, each of which has its own sanctified narrative structures, even as they critique these schools from the perspective of African Americans history and culture. For both the psychological terrain that Freud's thought delineates and the sociological terrain that Marxist thought analyzes have been and continue to be conflicted areas for African Americans. When seen only as symbols of oppression, African Americans have often been reduced to an institutional trope—as the very epitome of “the oppressed”—while African American writers are seen primarily as protest writers, as writers always responding to the other. Morrison has stated how she felt “bereft” when she read so many African American writers of the past, for they seem to be writing to others other than herself and that African Americans as a group had, generally speaking, been perceived in their own “home,” as having no specific historical or cultural context.⁵ On the other hand, when African Americans are perceived primarily and only as individuals, they are often declared psychologically and spiritually deficit, without internal complexities and desires—hence the use of terms, such as *The Slave*, *The Negro*, *The Underclass*, as if their very bodies can not yield multiple meanings.

Morrison has said that she was not interested in writing a novel about slavery.⁶ Such novels had struck her as being too “flat,” too “abstract”; instead she wanted the “heart of the story to be in the minds of the slaves themselves,”—an exploration of the interior landscape most literature had denied them. Previous chroniclers of slavery such as Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1966) had felt obliged to foreground the institution since so few Americans knew or wanted to remember their history. In a real sense, Morrison could present her characters as subjects, could begin to remember what we have not wanted to remember because of the social movements of the six-

ties and seventies and the intense scholarship on slavery that was a byproduct of those movements, and because she questioned the narrative conventions at the heart of African American literature.⁷

What *Beloved* especially emphasizes is not only the physical brutality of slavery, but the way in which that institution deprived the enslaved of the freedom to love, of the right to love. Paul D succinctly pinpoints that deprivation when he muses in response to Sethe's description of how she felt when she first experienced what she thought was "freedom" on her arrival at 124.

He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom. (162)

Beloved, as Morrison has said many times, is part of a trilogy that she is writing about love.⁸ How do narratives of love intersect with political narratives? How one can love if one is not free has been a major conundrum for African Americans. Love involves both social/political and subjective characteristics, and can be a means of freeing oneself from the dominant discourse. Yet love can seek to own, can be possession. What *Beloved* accomplishes so beautifully is to juxtapose both those terrains and to refuse them as binary oppositions. By insisting that love is political *and* private desire, Morrison responds to those who would characterize African American existence purely from a "political" perspective, even as she critiques those who perceive of love as only psychological and private. In a striking way, she reminds us all that all our desires are political, our politics rooted in desire. And by focusing on mother love, our first love, that love which we all expect, Morrison challenges our very definition of what it means to be a mother and suggests that motherhood itself is constructed, affected by specific societal/political constructs, even as it is basic to all human societies as we know it. Morrison interrogates our many meanings of motherhood, both for the mother and for the child, especially a daughter who of course is expected to become her mother—on the level of possession, ownership, responsibility.⁹

That Morrison is deeply concerned with how love straddles that space between freedom and ownership is clear if one reads all of her novels. The meaning of the beloved in relation to freedom has been for her a focal issue beginning with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), when the narrator states:

Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a *free* man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (163)

Morrison pushes that examination of the relationship between the lover, the beloved, and freedom in *Sula* (1974) when the character Sula in the novel of that name does not, at first, experience love as possessiveness and dies only after she suc-

cumbs (if only for a moment) to the desire to possess her lover, Ajaz. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison shifts the terms of her examination by linking Macon Dead's need to "own things" (as a bulwark against his own sense of powerlessness), with Hagar's attempt to kill Milkman for love. If she cannot possess him, no one will. Morrison's sixth novel, *Jazz* (1992) responds to and refines Hagar's killing romantic love, for it is based on the true story of a woman who is shot by her lover but allows herself to bleed to death so that he will not be caught.

What are the perimeters of love? Can love be love only if it is excessive? What is life without the risk that love entails, the adventure that it generates? Where does love end and possession begin? If one is prevented from having that right, might the desire to love become so "thick" that it turns in on itself?

To know what it means to be owned, and that such ownership is based on one's flesh, one's appearance, one's descent from the mother, is the African American's legacy. *Beloved* is based on an actual historical fact—that of the sensational story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave woman who attempted to kill *herself* and her children rather than be returned to slavery.¹⁰ Morrison leaves the historical facts behind to probe a most easily resolvable paradox—how the "natural" and personal emotion, mother love, is traumatically affected by the political institution of slavery. But Morrison has said that she did not inquire further into Garner's life other than to note the event for which this slave woman became famous. Morrison's research for the novel emphasizes the distinctions between legal and literary narrative and how they can be used imaginatively.

What Morrison noted was that Garner was tried not for attempting to kill her child, but for the "real crime," of attempting to escape, of stealing property, herself and her children from her master. For that crime, the historical Margaret Garner was tried, convicted, and sent back to slavery, thus restoring the property to the owner. What critics do not mention in their citing of the Margaret Garner case is its legal narrative, that it became a cause célèbre precisely because the abolitionists fought to have Garner tried for murder rather than for theft—because that would prove that she innately owned herself, that she was a human being incapable of being owned by another, and therefore she was responsible for her actions. Abolitionists of the time, such as Gerrit Smith, one of Douglass's most important patrons, emphasized the ways in which slaveowners steal "slaves [not] from a third person but a slave from himself." In order to reverse that process, the slave needed to steal himself from himself.¹¹ Thus, in the debate around slavery, the use of the concept of ownership was often contrasted with freedom. That juxtaposition is important because it is an indication that freedom in the American context is connected to ownership, a specifically contractual term, and one rooted in an economic system.

Morrison signals that relationship in one of the most often quoted lines of *Beloved*: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95), in which freedom does not by necessity result in self-ownership. Her use of language is central here: note the words "freeing," "claiming," "ownership," her pointing to their established relationship even as she insists on their distinctiveness. Critic Trudier Harris alludes to those distinctions in her essay, "Escaping Slavery But Not Its Images," when she points out that "in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison makes

clear where ownership leaves off and possession begins in the psychologically warping system called slavery,” and that some characters, like Stamp Paid, are owned during slavery but not possessed by it. His body may be enslaved but his mind is elsewhere—hence his name: *Stamp Paid*. As well, Harris points to the many images of currency in the text: Morrison’s use of the nickel as a description for faces; the way in which her ex-slave characters use debt-based images to describe their lives; and, of course, Sethe’s refrain throughout the novel that she had paid for what she had done and Beloved’s insistence that Sethe pay for her act of killing.

Harris’s point is important but we also need to emphasize what Morrison wants us to remember, what we want viscerally to forget, that the bodies of slaves had been determined entirely in terms of monetary worth. Thus Paul D can remember his own price, down to the cent (228). In nineteenth-century narrative after narrative, ex-slaves such as William Wells Brown relate the ways in which the parts of the slave’s body are assessed: their limbs, mouths, breasts, and penises were itemized as monetary worth. Morrison’s response, her antidote to that separating of parts, dismembering of the body, is Baby Suggs’s Sermon in the Clearing, when she fashions a rhetoric of healing rooted in the itemizing of that same body. It is because of their bodies, the appearance of their bodies, that African Americans were enslaved; it is their bodies on which slavery was written. Baby Suggs suggests that such a history might result in the hatred of one’s flesh:

“here,” she said, “in this place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.” (88)

Yet Baby Suggs’s heart will break and she will come to believe, after “white people came into her yard,” that “there was no grace—imaginary or real—and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that” (89). Morrison makes it clear that while loving one’s flesh is power, one still must contend with those four horsemen, backed by the power of law, who can claim that flesh. While narratives of personal empowerment through one’s love of one’s body have been claimed by feminists, it is important to note how central they are to race narratives. As Morrison’s nuanced text emphasizes, personal empowerment cannot completely transcend the power of unjust societal law and custom.

Morrison has told us about the ways in which the slave narratives of the nineteenth century affected her work. In the introductory remarks to her reading of *Beloved* at the University of California at Berkeley in October, 1987, Morrison emphasized the consistency with which slave narrators often told the reader that because of modesty, a specifically female term, and because of their desire not to offend their audience, a specifically African American consideration, they had to omit certain details of their “life” stories. Morrison talked about the consistency with which the narrators made such statements and pointed out that their omissions were partly due to the act that ex-slaves addressed a white audience. Even more important, she suggested they omitted events too horrible and too dangerous for them to recall. She went on to state that these consistent comments made by the narrators about the deliberate omissions in their narratives intrigued her and was the initial impulse for her writing the novel that would become *Beloved*. Her remarks remind us that narrative

strategies are critically affected by historical context, that narrative is both an outcome and a function of historical and imaginative process.¹²

For the tradition of the slave narrative has been central to, yet neglected by, many literary critics in their discussion of its influence on the writing of *Beloved*. Narratives as opposed to novels have received decidedly different treatment from literary critics perhaps because the former is considered to be autobiographical while the latter is considered to be artistic, the product of an imagination. That distinction, I believe, needs to be more thoroughly explored as to how narrative structures have meanings for their specific cultures.

As well, Morrison's emphases in her Berkeley talk call into question the tendency to monothologize slave narratives as if gender does not affect the narrative strategies writers use. A few critics have contrasted Morrison's conceptualization of freedom and ownership with that of Frederick Douglass who wrote the best known slave narrative of the period. In these male narratives, the moment of claiming oneself as free is usually encoded in the act of becoming free laborers. Hence slave narrators William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass recall with pride the first dollar they earn. Morrison pays tribute to that specifically male lineage when she notes Paul D's response to the first money he makes, though again she qualifies the slave narrators account by having Paul D make his first money by fighting for the Union cause, even as he is paid less than white soldiers (269).

Yet I am also impressed by the ways in which Morrison has revised *female* slave narratives in relation to male narratives. Her narrative strategies remind us that gender as well as race influenced the ways in which stories were told. There is a small but important body of female slave narratives in which successful runaway slaves record aspects of their experience. Perhaps the most notable of these is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* written by the freedwoman/domestic Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent. For much of this century, questions of authorship camouflaged the significance of this narrative. It is only recently that Jean Yellen has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that Harriet Jacobs did exist and was consistently sexually harassed, if not raped, by her very respectable doctor/master; that she did escape slavery only by hiding in an attic for seven years primarily because she could not leave her children to the brutal system of slavery; and that she did write her own story. Issues of ownership/authorship, a point to which I will return later, are central to Morrison's concerns in this novel—one reason why the novel is written in the form that it is.

In this regard I think that it is important to note how Morrison changes the Garner story. The differences should give us pause about conflating literary and legal interpretations. Morrison allow her character to be "freed" so that she must confront her own act. She also changes another important element of the Garner story. Angelita Reyes, in an essay on the historical case of Margaret Garner, points out that the child Garner does kill was a mulatto, probably the child of her master's. But Morrison changes that fact/possibility by making the "crawling-already?" baby as well as Sethe's other children the result of her relationship with another slave, Halle, to whom she feels married. In so doing Morrison eliminates another rationale that might have obscured the paradox she is exploring. For slave-women who killed children who are the result of rape, or forced breeding, might be seen as striking out at

the master/rapist and resisting the role of perpetuating the system of slavery through breeding. *Beloved* is replete with examples of slave women who killed children begot as a result of rape or other sexual perversities. Such is the case of Sethe's own mother. According to Nan, the woman who takes care of Sethe, her mother

threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island . . . Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (62)

But Sethe's killing of her "crawling-already?" baby is followed by her claiming of that baby for whose grave inscription, "Dearly Beloved," she is willing to pay by having her body raped. Sethe's sacrifice makes it clear that her act of killing is for the sake of a child she knows and loves rather than an act against the rapist slaveowner. When Beloved first appears in the novel, she deliberately spells out her name, letter by letter, reminding us of the difficulty of naming themselves for African Americans. Further, Morrison underlines the distinction between Sethe's and her mother's act by having Sethe remember Nan's words at the pivotal moment when she is prodded by Beloved's question: "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" (60).

Sethe's insistence on being the Mother has much to do with the pain she felt of not being mothered. While her mother could never nurse her, a memory she represses until Beloved's question makes her remember—Sethe insists on having, *possessing* the one last thing that a slave woman could own—her children who will taste her milk, and only her milk. For Sethe, the most terrible act done to her is not rape (the most intense violation of women in Western texts), but the taking away of her milk, her precious gift to her children, the basis of life. Throughout the text, that act reverberates and is inevitably linked to the killing of her "crawling-already?" baby. To get that milk to her baby is also the compelling reason why she is able to endure the harrowing journey to "freedom." She even personifies herself as that milk. In relating her horrendous past to Paul D Sethe emphasizes that: "Nobody had her milk but me . . . The milk would be there and I would be there with it" (16). I find it crucial to Morrison's concern in this novel that Sethe itemizes her milk in much the same way the slaveowners itemized the different parts of the slave's body as if that is all she is, all that she is worth.

In inventing the character of Beloved, Morrison brings back the *one* person who can challenge Sethe's ownership of her children. Whether Beloved is in fact Sethe's murdered child returned to her is not as important as Sethe's belief that she is her daughter. As many critics have commented on, Beloved is the embodiment of the past that all the major characters want to disremember but cannot forget. Her role in the novel is invested in Morrison's use of the folk concept of "rememory," common to many African and African diasporic peoples and a term that my mother uses. Still, Beloved is tainted by the capitalistic mode of the U.S. at that time when African Americans were being forced to move from a peasant economy to that of an industrial mode. Morrison characterizes Beloved's desire in terms of "cost": "Sethe was trying to make up for the hand-saw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (251).

The character Beloved is the repository of memory as many critical pieces writ-

ten on this novel have noted.¹³ Memory is a central theme in *Beloved*. Yet memory, as such, is not unique to ex-slaves. One question that came to mind as I first read *Beloved* was the particular form of this novel's process of remembering, and what memory specifically means for its characters. Certainly, one could discuss the meaning of memory in the novel in terms of the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and daughter that Freud theorized about, or even in general terms as to the way any group of human beings (for example the Jews) who had suffered a holocaust might have repressed that horrible memory, and the consequences of the refusal to remember. Morrison, however, not only points to this general phenomenon of collective amnesia, but also specifically to why the Middle Passage was, for Africans, a most extreme violation of one of the basic tenets of West African cosmology.

For the past five years, I have been giving a talk called "*Beloved* as Ancestral Worship" to point to that extreme violation and to the process which Morrison in this text uses to expose and dramatize that psychic rupture perhaps for the first time in American Literature in such a complex and haunting way. And I have been startled, when I have given that talk, that few teachers or students even know what the Middle Passage is, or that African philosophical traditions exist. There was very little awareness on their part, certainly because of our educational system, that there might be narrative structures, for example, an African cosmological system that generated the dissonances they experienced in this text.

I certainly did not understand very much about what African ancestral worship was, or what it could mean, when I first read *Beloved*. But I did recognize something from my own Caribbean culture. I was struck by Morrison's representation of the character Beloved as an embodied spirit, a spirit that presents itself as a body. In the Caribbean, spirits are everywhere, are naturally in the world, and are not ghosts in the horror-genre sense of that term. The spirits, the ancestors, to quote a song by the black women's singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, "are in the wind, in the trees, in the waters, in the rocks." In an interview in 1986, Morrison herself reiterated that point: that for African Americans, at least until the recent past, the experience of spirits communicating with the living was a natural, rather than some kind of weird, unnatural, event. Hence her representation of the spirit character as a body. Moreover, in my tradition, ancestral spirits must be nurtured and fed, or they will be angry or at the least, sad. When I was growing up, and even at present, many of my folk, before an important event, pour what we call "libations." If one does not, the ancestors are not being given the respect they deserve. If ancestors are consistently not fed, or have not resolved some major conflict, especially the manner of their death, they are tormented and may come back to the realm we characterize as that of the living, sometimes in the form of an apparently newborn baby. So often I have heard someone in the Caribbean say, "This one is an old one and has come back because she needs to clear up something big." Although Beloved is not a newborn baby in terms of her apparent age, she acts as she would have if she were the age when she was killed by her mother. And there are many references in the text of the novel to her skin and eyes which appear to be that of a newborn baby.

I was also struck by the way the character Beloved needs constantly to be fed, especially sweet things that the food ancestors, even voduns like Erzulie, the Haitian vodun of love, relish. Like bodies, the ancestral spirits in my Caribbean context who

come back to visit us eat and drink and are carnal. Yet they differ from the living in that while they do appear as bodies, like *Beloved*, their eyes and skin are like newborn babes.

Stimulated by these memories from my African-Caribbean culture as well as by Morrison's own remarks in her interviews about the novel, I began to try to articulate whether and how African belief systems might be crucial to an understanding of the novel. In contemplating Morrison's epigraph to *Beloved*, "To the sixty million or more," I was reminded of a recurrent childhood event. I used to wonder aloud who my ancestors were, not only the elders we knew about in my family, but also those who had come from Africa. How had they gotten to the Caribbean? How had they managed to survive? I was also curious about why no one in my family, as "chauvinistic" a clan as you could find, ever talked about that transition from Africa to the New World. Some elders even tried to deny that we came from Africa and had been slaves, despite the presence of the Market Square where the inscription read that slaves had been auctioned there. Why, I wondered, did we pour libations? To whom were we pouring libations? What were their names? West Africans I know also poured libations.

Reading *Beloved* revived these questions. And listening to Morrison speak about her novel as a prayer, a memorial, a fixing ceremony for those who did not survive the Middle Passage and whose names we did not know, reinforced my desire to approach *Beloved* from an African perspective. In other words, my training as to what a novel should be did not take into account the basic structure of so many West African narratives—that of ritual.

My curiosity about Morrison's ritual narrative elements led me to several studies and especially to John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, which I had read years before as I was working on my first book. Even now I hesitate to use the term, "African ancestor worship," without worrying about legitimate concerns that I might be denigrating African religions, for the practice I am about to describe has been so maligned in the West that even African scholars apologize when they use the term. The *Christian* African theologian, John Mbiti, warns us that in traditional West African societies, Africans do not worship their ancestors. Rather, they believe that when a person passes (and this phrase is important, as it is still consistently used by African Americans), that is, "dies," in the Western sense, they do not disappear as long as someone remembers them, their name, their character. Mbiti states: "So long as the living dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality" (32). The acts of feeding the dead and pouring libations are meant as symbols, active symbols of communion, fellowship, and renewal. Thus continuity, not only of genes but also of active remembering, is critical to a West African's sense of her or his own personal being and, beyond that, of the beingness of the group.

What does it mean when not only Morrison's protagonists in her first four novels, but millions of African Americans in the New World are cut off from their "living dead," and cannot know their names and thus can not remember them? In not being able to remember, name, and feed those who passed on in the Middle Passage, those who survived *had* to abandon their living dead to the worst possible fate that could befall a West African: complete annihilation. Mbiti tells us that "to 'die' im-

mediately is a tragedy that must be avoided at all costs" (208). What a tragedy, then, when millions "die" immediately. In a sense, Morrison anticipates that psychic horror by using the wit and irony of the African American tradition in *Song of Solomon*, when she names the descendants of Solomon the Deads, their name being the result of an error in a white man's records. In *Beloved*, however, wit gives way to a facing of the tragic wrenching of that disnaming, not only for those who did not survive but also for those who did. She evokes that terrible space of being/non-being in one of the last passages of *Beloved*.

Everybody knows what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name. Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waits to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

It was not a story to pass on. (274)

Mbiti tells us that African time is not linear. Rather, the future, in the Western sense, is absent, because the present is always an unfolding of the past (21–22). Thus every "future" is already contained in what Westerners call the "past." When one views the novel from this African cosmological perspective it is especially significant that the embodied past is represented by a girl-child/woman, the character Beloved. It is not surprising, then, that the spirit who is the most wrathful and most in pain is that of a child who dies in a violent, unnatural way, for the child represents the sustenance of both the past and the present as it becomes the future, not only for an individual family but also for the group as a whole. Moreover, in many traditional African societies women, as potential mothers, are the bulwark against immediate "death." For in giving birth to children, mothers produce those who are more likely to know and remember their ancestors. If one has no children, who will pour libations to you? That valuable status that West African women have as mothers is also, of course, a double-edged sword, not only for those who are "barren" but also for those who have children whom they cannot mother, which includes passing on the memory of their ancestors.

In *Beloved*, Morrison not only explores the psychic horror of those who can no longer call their ancestors' names, but also the dilemma of the mother who knows her children will be born into and live in the realm of those who *cannot* call their ancestors' names. Sethe's killing of her "crawling-already?" baby is not only the killing of that individual baby, but the collective anguish African women must have experienced when they realized their children were cut off forever from their "living dead" who would never be called upon, remembered or fed. By exploring the novel from the point of view of African cosmology, one sees it for what it could be in the world: a prayer, a ritual grounded in active remembering.¹⁵

As powerful as the character Beloved is, I do want to remind us of the importance of her sister, Denver, especially for three interconnected issues: active remem-

bering; the African Americans of the present; and Morrison's narrative strategies. For Denver is the one character in the novel who has not directly experienced Africa or slavery, except through memory. She is the third woman of the trinity, Morrison's signature in every one of her novels. Never a slave and what that ideology of existence conveys, Denver is pivotal not only in terms of the trajectory of the future, but also in Morrison's unrelenting analysis of freedom and ownership—one that is a premonition of the dilemma about romantic love that Morrison will explore in her next novel, *Jazz*.

Described as “a nickel face” rather than the cent that Paul D refers to as the bottom line of his face, Denver will venture out of the yard and encounter the community. It is Denver who faces the future, as African Americans of the reconstruction era and New World African American women such as Sula had to, if they were to preserve themselves and their families. While Paul D might, in the opened-ended space of the novel, proclaim to Sethe that She's her best thing, and that “[they] got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273), that proclamation would have been impossible if Denver was not willing and able to be “At Yo Service” (255).

It is she who will have to face another variation on the effects of ownership/freedom and love. Blessed by Stamp Paid, her surrogate father and deliverer, she will nonetheless have to go beyond his world, the world of her mother where ownership will not reside only directly in the body but in the symbol of the body and its labor. It is she who says to Paul D “Mis Bodwin taught her stuff . . . She says I might go to Oberlin. She's experimenting on me.” And he didn't say, “Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white school teacher” (266).

Described in the last pages of the text as looking like her father, Denver—whose name is specifically American and related to a white woman—is the one who encounters, in the home of the liberal abolitionist Bodwin, a portent of the future, an example of what we now call “ethnic notions”:

With those assurances, Denver left, but not before she had seen sitting on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back father than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pocket. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins or crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words, “At Yo Service.” (255)

In keeping the past from her, Sethe does not give Denver the tools to understand her action and therefore its effects on her daughter. In her soliloquy in the celebrated “She's mine” section of the novel, Denver reminds us of the dangerous effects of disremembering:

I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something

else terrible enough to make her do it again. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. (205)

That unknowing continues to exist in America and is one reason, as Cornel West would put it, that “Race” continues to Matter, affecting in the most violent and violating ways American society—not only for white Americans but for African Americans as well. Sethe cannot understand the meaning of her past unless it is seen in relation to those with whom she shares that past. Thus as Sayta Mohanty points out in “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity,” “[t]he cognitive task of “rememory” is dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labor of trusting—oneself, one’s judgements, one’s companions” (56–57). The entire novel moves on this possibility of trust as the antidote to the economy of ownership and possession. Memory seen only as the property of one individual cannot move towards the healing that Sethe and the other characters in the novel need—and by implication Morrison insists we need. Individual memory erupts in bits and pieces, snatches, and can only begin to achieve some coherence when others memories interact with it.

Denver faces a different society with different narratives—hence our desire to construct a story (that has a beginning, middle and end) about her father, Halle, her mother and the spirit sister with whom she has lived. Her attempts at narrative structure as opposed to her mother’s and sister’s tell us much about the transition that African Americans are making in the economic and social as well as the metaphoric realm. That is one reason why *Beloved* is written in the way that it is. Morrison is not merely being “postmodern” for its only sake, or to demonstrate her literary virtuosity or to be a “difficult” writer. The novel circles and circles, as Valerie Smith points out, calling attention to the “inability of the text to convey the experience of what can no longer be spoken” (352). At the same time, that circling leaves spaces for us as readers to help write the text. There is an implied “we” in the narration, as Morrison invents unorthodox novelistic techniques, designed to illuminate the process Africans are going through from structuring their stories through elements such as ritual; to a slave people whose narratives are based on trauma; then to a urban people who relied on the musicians (ritual) but also to reconstructions of linear beginnings middles and ends, in which an extraordinary person such as Denver ventures out of the yard; then to that postmodern period when the music, as embodied by such superstars as Michael Jackson, has in part been appropriated by bourgeois capitalism. Ironically the space of the writing, because it is not at the very peak of post-industrial capitalist investment, has been one in which a writer like Morrison has been able to insert that element of oral folklore, the choral note, as she eschews ownership of the text and invites the reader to participate in this remembering. In relinquishing possession, she points to processes of achieving freedom in communal linguistic practices, for “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.”

In being awarded the Nobel Prize, Morrison might be said to have achieved the ultimate status of the “bourgeois writer.” It is important, however, that in her speech on that occasion, she asserts that for her “a dead language is not only no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language, content to admire its own paralysis” (13).

I began this essay with the story Morrison recreated on the occasion of her Nobel Prize Speech about a wise blind woman, a bird and young people, in which she chooses to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer. Distrustful of each other, both the old woman and the young people speak from their own perspective and in dialogic positionings. Morrison ends the tale with these words:

It's quiet when the children finish speaking until the woman breaks the silence. "Finally," she says, "I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hand because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together. (30)

This ending is a particularly unique one for African American writers, for in it Morrison indicates a change in the status of the organic intellectual from that of nineteenth century African American writers, who like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, had to insist on their authorship, that their text was written by themselves, in order to prove that they were human beings. In acknowledging and celebrating the communal authorship of her texts, as well as her individual role in that authorship, Morrison has rethought her views about the ownership of language, releasing it to new modes of freedom, ownership and writing that can be now be imagined.

ENDNOTES

1. A version of this essay was presented in French Universities in January of 1993, then at the first Toni Morrison Conference at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky in 1994, and at the Heidelberg University in Germany in 1995. A section is included in my "Fixing Methodologies: *Beloved*."
2. For example, see: Linda Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Marilyn Mobley, "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." Jocelyn Moody, "Ripping Away the Veil of Slavery: Literary, Communal Love and Self-Esteem in Three Slave Women's Narratives." Molly Travis, "Speaking from the Silence of the Slave Narrative: *Beloved* and African American Women's History."
3. For the most complete compendium on this point of view see Phillip Page's *Dangerous Freedom*.
4. See *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, nos. 3 & 4, for many critics' views on this subject.
5. See Toni Morrison's interview in San Francisco Newsreel's video series *African American Videos*, 1992.
6. In her lecture as a distinguished lecturer at U. C. Berkeley in 1987, Morrison made this point.
7. For a discussion of these points, see my "'Somebody Forgot To Tell Somebody Something': African American Women's Historical Novels: *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*."
8. See the many television interviews with Toni Morrison following the publication of *Beloved* such as the "McNeil-Lehrer News Hour," and Bill Moyers's "PBS Interview with Toni Morrison," as well as newspaper interviews such as Marsha Darling's "Review of *Beloved*."
9. For an extensive discussion of this idea, see Helene Moglen, "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*."

10. Morrison discusses the Garner case in Bill Moyers, "A Conversation with Toni Morrison."
11. I owe this insight to Alberto Perez, a post-doc student in African American Studies at U. C. Berkeley.
13. See for example: Rebecca Ferguson, "History, Memory and Language in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"; Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Remembering the Body as Historical Text"; Barbara Offut Mathieson, "Memory and Mother Love in Morrison's *Beloved*"; Marilyn Sanders Mobley, "A Different Remembering: Memory History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*."
15. See McNeil-Lehrer, Nov. 1987

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