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Author(s): Jean Wyatt
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Jean Wyatt

Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

JEAN WYATT, professor of English and comparative literary studies at Occidental College, is the author of Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing *(U of North Carolina P, 1990), on fantasies of romantic love, artists' lives, and alternative family structures in twentieth-century novels by women. She has also written essays on Woolf, Drabble, and Charlotte Brontë. She is working on a study of family structures and family dynamics in novels of this century.*

IN *BELOVED* Toni Morrison puts into words three orders of experience that Western cultural narratives usually leave out: childbirth and nursing from a mother's perspective; the desires of a preverbal infant; and the sufferings of those destroyed by slavery, including the Africans who died on the slave ships. The project of incorporating into a text subjects previously excluded from language causes a breakdown and restructuring of linguistic forms; to make room for the articulation of alternative desires, Morrison's textual practice flouts basic rules of normative discourse.

Through the device of the ghost story, Morrison gives a voice to the preverbal infant killed by a mother desperate to save her child from slavery: the dead baby, Beloved, comes back in the body of a nineteen-year-old, able to articulate infantile feelings that ordinarily remain unspoken. Her desire to regain the maternal closeness of a nursing baby powers a dialogue that fuses pronoun positions and abolishes punctuation, undoing all the marks of separation that usually stabilize language. Beloved also has a collective identity: she represents a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the Middle Passage, the "Sixty Million and more" of the novel's epigraph. She describes conditions on the slave ships in fragmented images without connective syntax or punctuation, capturing the loss of demarcation and differentiation of those caught in an "oceanic" space between cultural identities, between Africa and an unknown destination (Spillers 72).

The mother figure, Sethe, defines herself as a maternal body. Her insistence on her own physical presence and connection to her children precludes an easy acceptance of the separations and substitutions that govern language: she will not, for example, use signifiers to represent her nursing baby, so she cannot tell the story of the baby's murder. The novel's discourse also tends to resist substitution, "the very law of metaphoric operation" (Rose 38): when the narrative

focuses on either the maternal body or the haunted house, metaphors abandon their symbolic dimension to adhere to a baseline of literal meaning. For instance, a figure of speech in which *weight* usually means "responsibility" turns out to describe only the physical weight of Sethe's breasts (18). A similar "literalization" of spatial metaphors mimics the materializations in the haunted house: the phrase "she moved him" indicates not that Beloved stirred Paul D's emotions but that she physically moved him, from one location to another (114).[1] The continual shift from the abstract to the concrete creates the illusion of words sliding back to a base in the material world, an effect congruent with Morrison's emphasis on embodiment—on both the physical processes of maternity and the concrete presence of the ghost: "Usually [slavery] is an abstract concept. . . . The purpose of making [the ghost] real is making history possible, making memory real—somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table, so you have to think about it" (qtd. in Darling 6).

Describing a child's entry into language as a move from maternal bodily connection to a register of abstract signifiers, Lacan inadvertently sums up the psychological prerequisites for belonging to a patriarchal symbolic order. I invoke his paradigm to point out Morrison's deviations from dominant language practices and from the psychological premises that underlie them; I use the term *maternal symbolic* to discuss not only an alternative language incorporating maternal and material values but also a system that, like Lacan's symbolic, locates subjects in relation to other subjects. While Sethe operates within her own "maternal symbolic" of presence and connection, it is Denver, Sethe's surviving daughter, who in the end finds a more inclusive replacement for Lacan's paternal symbolic: a social order that conflates oral and verbal pleasures, nurtures her with words, and teaches her that caring is "what language was made for" (252).[2]

The Maternal Body in Language: A Discourse of Presence

The mother figure of *Beloved* occupies a contradictory position in discourse. On the one hand, Sethe's self-definition as maternal body enables Morrison to construct a new narrative form—a specifically female quest powered by the desire to get one's milk to one's baby—that features childbirth as high adventure. On the other hand, this same self-definition forecloses Sethe's full participation in language.

In presenting Sethe's journey from slavery in Kentucky to the free state of Ohio as a maternal quest, Morrison is elaborating the figure of the heroic slave mother that in many female slave narratives replaces the figure of the heroic male fugitive. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, turns the rhetoric of heroic resolve common to male slave narratives into a text of courage drawn from a mother's love for her children: "I was resolved that I would foil my master and save my children, or I would perish in the attempt"; "Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for [the children's] sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage" (84, 89–90). If Jacobs (and other female slave narrators, like Lucy Delaney) appropriates the conventions of male heroism for the celebration of motherhood,[3] Morrison in turn reconstructs the acts of maternal heroism as the reproductive feats of the maternal body. Both Sethe and Jacobs find the courage to escape because they want their children to be free—"It was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom," writes Jacobs (89)—but Jacobs's spiritual and emotional commitment becomes in Sethe a physical connection to the nursing baby she has sent on ahead: "I had to get my milk to my baby girl" (16). Sethe, like Jacobs, experiences the wish to give up the fight for survival and die, but while Jacobs says she was "willing to bear on" "for the children's sakes" (127), the reason that Sethe gives for enduring is the physical presence of the baby in her womb: "[I]t didn't seem such a bad idea [to die], . . . but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on . . . in her lifeless body grieved her so" that she persevered (31).

The central heroic feat of Sethe's journey is her giving birth in the face of seemingly insuperable obstacles. Alone in the wilderness in a sinking boat on the Ohio River, in a state of

physical injury and exhaustion, Sethe has only Amy, a white runaway indentured servant, to help her. Breaking the silence that has surrounded birth in Western narrative, Morrison provides a physically detailed account of childbirth, and—also new in Western cultural discourse—she gives labor its due as good work: Sethe and Amy "did something together appropriately and well" (84).

When Sethe finally wins through to Ohio, the text celebrates not the achievement of freedom but togetherness; a confusion of prepositions reflects the multiplicity of connections between mother and children: "Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among but especially with them all" (93). At the triumphant close of her maternal quest, Sethe reports, "I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide"; "she had milk enough for all" (162, 100). Thus the "nurturing power of the slave mother" (Gates xxxi) celebrated in women's slave narratives becomes literal in Morrison's account: Sethe's monumental body and abundant milk give and sustain life. But in spite of its mythic dimensions, the maternal body seems to lack a subjective center. During the journey, Sethe experiences her own existence only in relation to her children's survival; she is "concerned" not for herself but "for the life of her children's mother." She thinks, "I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die" and pictures herself as "a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours" (30, 31, 34).

Sethe maintains this roundabout self-definition through the many images of nursing that picture her as the sustaining ground of her children's existence; even after the children are weaned, her bond with them remains so strong that she continues to think of it as a nursing connection (100, 162, 200, 216). While celebrating the courage and determination that Sethe draws from this attachment, Morrison's narrative also dramatizes the problems of Sethe's maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it both allows her to take the life of one of them and precludes putting that act into words.

When Sethe tries to explain her attempt to kill herself and her children to prevent their reenslavement, she finds speech blocked: "Sethe knew that the circle she was making around . . . the subject would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask."[4] A gap remains at the heart of her story, which the omniscient narrator subsequently fills in:

> [W]hen she saw [the slave owner] coming [to recapture them, she] collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them . . . where they would be safe. (163)

Sethe extends her rights over her own body—the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery—to the "parts of her" that are her children, folding them back into the maternal body in order to enter death as a single unit (though she succeeded in killing only one of her daughters). The novel withholds judgment on Sethe's act and persuades the reader to do the same, presenting the infanticide as the ultimate contradiction of mothering under slavery. "It was absolutely the right thing to do, . . . but it's also the thing you have no right to do," Morrison commented in an interview (Rothstein).[5]

Sethe's sense of continuity with her children also makes it difficult for her to take the position of narrating subject and tell her story. Her troubled relation to language can be read as a carryover from a nursing mother's attitude toward separation. When she engineered her family's escape from slavery, Sethe had to send her nursing baby ahead of her to Ohio: "I told the women in the wagon . . . to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days [the baby] wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it" (16). Sethe would not compromise with absence, overlooking the potentially life-threatening lack of food for her baby "for a few days" to insist on presence: the milk would be "there," and the mother would be "there with it." The standpoint of nursing mother precludes separa-

tion and the substitutions that any separation would require.

Sethe's embrace of a relational system of presence and connection, her reluctance to accept the principle of substitution, extends to her refusal to invest in words and helps explain the link between her failure to tell the story of her baby girl's death and that baby's embodiment in Beloved. Lacan's account of a child's entry into language opposes bodily connection and verbal exchange in a way that clarifies Sethe's choices. To move into a position in language and the social order, according to Lacan, an infant must sacrifice its imaginary sense of wholeness and continuity with the mother's body. (Sethe is of course in the mother's position rather than the child's, but her physical connection with her nursing baby resembles the infant's initial radical dependency on the mother's body.) Lacan later makes the repudiation of maternal continuity an oedipal event, when the social law of the father prohibits the child's access to the maternal body. In "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," however, he borrows from Freud an unmediated mother-child anecdote, perhaps to focus more intensely on the either-or choice between bodily presence and abstract signifier. Freud's grandson Ernst becomes a speaking subject in the same moment that he acknowledges his mother's absence. Throwing a spool out of his crib and bringing it back to the accompaniment of sounds ("ooo! aaa!") that Freud interprets as "Fort! Da!" ("Gone! There!"), the baby assumes a symbolic mastery over what he cannot control in reality —his mother's presence and absence (Freud, *Pleasure* 8–10). Lacan adds that the child "thereby raises his desire to a second power," investing desire in language (103). By acknowledging that he must put a signifier there, where his mother's body used to be, the child both recognizes absence and accepts loss. The word "manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing" (104), or in John Muller's gloss, "the word destroys the immediacy of objects and gives us distance from them" (29).[6] It is this distance, this loss, that Sethe rejects. Just as she declined any mediation between her body and her nursing baby, insisting on presence, she now refuses to replace that baby with a signifier, to accept the irrevocability of absence by putting the child's death into words. Her denial of loss is fundamentally antimetaphorical—that is, the refusal to displace libido onto words is a refusal to let one thing stand for another and so impedes the whole project of speech.[7] Sethe remains without a narrative but with the baby ghost—there, embodied, a concrete presence.

Through Sethe's reluctance to substitute words for things, not just Beloved but all the painful events of the past that Sethe has not transformed into narrative are left there, where those events first occurred. "[W]hat I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened," Sethe tells Denver (36). The plot reflects this spatialized time, as incidents from the past occupy the various rooms in which they originally took place. In the shed, the murder replays, at least for Beloved; in the keeping room, an injured and demoralized Sethe once more gets bathed "in sections" by loving hands; and a white man "coming into [Sethe's] yard" triggers a repeat of her murderous attack —with a saving difference (123–24, 272, 262). The plot—present time—cannot move forward because Sethe's space is crammed with the past:

> When she woke the house crowded in on her: there was the door where the soda crackers were lined up in a row; the white stairs her baby girl loved to climb; the corner where Baby Suggs mended shoes . . . the exact place on the stove where Denver burned her fingers. . . . There was no room for any other thing or body. . . . (39)

There are no gaps in Sethe's world, no absences to be filled in with signifiers; everything is there, an oppressive plenitude.

Language reinforces the sense that materializations clog the haunted house: spatial images that usually function as figures of speech take shape as actions. For example, when Paul D, a former slave from the same plantation as Sethe, finds her again after an absence of eighteen years, he feels out his chances for establishing a relationship with her by asking if "there was some space" for him (45). While his expression seems natural in the circumstances, the situation in the

house causes Paul D to make a space for himself more literally than any suitor in literature: "[H]olding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house" (18). Evidently Morrison wants the opening statement of the novel—that "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (3) —to be taken quite literally. Before the dead baby takes the shape of Beloved, her amorphous spirit haunts the house, filling it so completely with her spite that "[t]here was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D . . . broke up the place, making room, . . . then standing in the place he had made" (39).

After Paul D exorcises the ghost from the house and it returns in the shape of Beloved, spatial metaphors continue to reflect the materialization of things that belong by rights in a spiritual realm. The sentence "She moved him," for example, opens a chapter about Beloved's domestic relations with Paul D (114). Because the grammatical object of *moved* is a human being—*him* rather than *it*—the phrase seems at first glance to operate figuratively, as in "she affected him emotionally." But the spiritual meaning quickly gives way to physical actuality as it becomes clear that Paul D "was being moved" literally (126)—out of Sethe's bed, out of the living room, finally out of the house altogether—by Beloved's jealous desire to expel her rival.

Textual practice similarly seconds Sethe's emphasis on presence by rejecting metaphorical substitutions for the maternal body. In the opening scene, after Sethe has told Paul D about her quest to get her milk to her baby in Ohio, he cups her breasts from behind in a display of tenderness: "What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (18). The reader does a double take: the phrase "in somebody else's hands" usually functions as a metaphor meaning "someone else's responsibility"; here the hands are literally there, and what rests in them is not an abstract concept but flesh. The same slippage occurs in the next sentence, as Sethe imagines being "relieved of the weight of her breasts" (18). Because *weight* appears within the usually figurative phrase "relieved of the weight of," readers assume that it is a metaphor for care or responsibility, but the modifying phrase "of her breasts" gives *weight* back its literal meaning. When the maternal body becomes the locus of discourse, the metaphorical becomes the actual, a move that reinforces Sethe's definition of motherhood as an embodied responsibility: there are no substitutes, metaphorical or otherwise, for her breasts.

In the same passage, Paul D "reads" the story of slavery engraved on Sethe's back by a final savage beating. Because the scar tissue is without sensation—"her back skin had been dead for years" (18)—Sethe's back is, in a sense, not her own; it has been appropriated and reified as a tablet on which the slave masters have inscribed their code. She cannot substitute for this discourse of violence her own version of the event, in spite of Paul D's insistence (over the space of three pages) that she tell him about it. Sethe refuses, repeating instead Amy Denver's description of the wound left by the whipping as "a whole tree . . . in bloom": "I got a tree on my back. . . . I've never seen it and never will. But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves" (79, 15–16). The metaphor masks suffering and puts it at the distance of a beautiful image—an act of poetic detachment appropriate, perhaps, to Amy's position of onlooker after the event but not to Sethe's subjective experience of pain.[8] Unable to seize the word and thus become master of her own experience, Sethe remains "a body whose flesh . . . bears . . . the marks of a cultural text" that inscribes her as slave (Spillers 67).[9] Sethe's problematic relation to language results from her position as body not only in a maternal order but also in a social order that systematically denied the subject position to those it defined as objects of exchange.[10]

In the absence of a speaking subject, Morrison makes the most of body language, as the passage I have been analyzing, quoted in full, shows:

> Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. . . . [H]e would tolerate no

> peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands.
>
> Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to . . . just stand there a minute or two, . . . relieved of the weight of her breasts . . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank? (17–18)

On Sethe's back, the extreme of a patriarchal symbolic order "recast . . . in the terms of cultural domination" (Abel 187), a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers 67); on her front, the locus of a maternal system of relations based on presence and connection: Paul D, flexible man, "reads" both stories through touch, quickly becoming a participant in Sethe's discourse of bodily connection. Implicit in the space Paul D's kind body protects is the possibility of yet a third relational system: Sethe thinks that with him there she might feel safe enough to "go inside," "feel the hurt her back ought to," and thus replace the outside language the slave owners imprinted on her body with an inner language of articulate memory; she might be able to tell her story (46, 18). But the potential for reclaiming her past along with its pain is not realized till Paul D re-creates this holding space in the last scene, enabling Sethe to move into the position of narrating subject from a base in physical intimacy. First she has to live out the unspeakable drama of the past that possesses the house—a symbiosis with her daughter that would only have been appropriate eighteen years before, when Beloved was a nursling in body as well as in spirit.

Who Is Beloved?

In part 2, Sethe lives out the dream of sustaining her ghostly daughter with her own substance—a nursing fantasy writ large. On the personal level, Beloved is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in *Beloved*, the ghost represents—as the generic name Beloved suggests—all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships. In one sense, then, the pain that haunts Sethe's house is nothing special: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (5). Accordingly, Beloved's message means one thing to those within the family circle and another thing altogether to those who listen from outside the house, from the vantage point of the community.[11] Morrison introduces the conversation of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver that takes up most of part 2 as "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199): in its drive toward unity, the mother-daughter dialogue wipes out all the positions of separation necessary to language, and it is in this sense "unspeakable." But Stamp Paid, who listens from outside, from social ground, hears in Beloved's speech a whole chorus of "the black and angry dead," a communal "roaring" that is "unspeakable" because the accumulated sufferings under slavery overwhelm the expressive possibilities of ordinary discourse (198, 181, 199). What cannot be encompassed within the symbolic order continues to haunt it, hovering on the edge of language.

Beloved herself ends up outside social discourse, wandering, after the narrative's conclusion, in a limbo where she is "[d]isremembered and unaccounted for" (274). Her position in the epilogue is symmetrical with that of the "Sixty Million and more" of Morrison's epigraph. Having perished on the slave ships midway between a place in African history and a place in the history of American slavery, these lost souls never made it into any text. Lost still, they remain stranded in the epigraph, where their human features are erased beneath a number; they are quantified in death, as they had been in life by a property system that measured wealth in terms of a body count. Morrison's "and more" indicates the residue left over, left out, unaccounted for by any text—like Beloved at the end. Denver gestures toward the larger dimension of Beloved's identity when she responds to Paul D's question "You think [the ghost] sure 'nough your sister?" with an echo of the epigraph: "At times. At times I think she was—more" (266).

Morrison is unwilling, apparently, to leave the

historical parallel at the level of suggestion. She links Beloved to the "Sixty Million and more" by joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships. But first, in a monologue that comes out of nowhere, Beloved gives an account of slave ship experience:

> I am always crouching the man on my face is dead . . . in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me . . . he locks his eyes and dies on my face . . . the others do not know that he is dead. (211–12)

Since Morrison does not identify these scattered perceptions as observations of life on a slave ship or tell how Beloved came to be there or give any coordinates of time and place, readers are baffled: they have no idea where they are. Their confusion thus imitates the disorientation of the Africans who were thrown into the slave ships without explanation, suspended without boundaries in time and space, "in movement across the Atlantic but . . . also nowhere at all . . . inasmuch as . . . the captive[s] . . . did not know where [they were]." The fragmented syntax and absence of punctuation robs the reader of known demarcations, creating a linguistic equivalent of the Africans' loss of differentiation in an "oceanic" space that "unmade" cultural identities and erased even the lines between male and female, living and dead (Spillers 72).

Readers who try to understand these unsettling images as metaphors for Beloved's passage from death to life can find a basis for doing so in the African American narrative tradition, which pictures the Middle Passage as a journey toward a horrific rebirth. (Robert Hayden calls the Middle Passage a "voyage through death to life upon these shores" [48, 54]; Richard Wright remarks, "We millions of black folk who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth" [12].) The nightmare collage of bodies piled on bodies in the slave ship, where it is hard to tell the living from the dead, would then figure Beloved's difficulty in discerning, in her transitional state, whether she is alive or dead, traveling toward death or toward life. But Morrison everywhere demands that readers confront the horrors of slavery "in the flesh" rather than at the comfortable distance of metaphor (qtd. in Darling 5). "I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bedeviled by the past," she comments, "but to have it be incarnate" (qtd. in Rothstein). What at first appears symbolic becomes actual in a characteristic collapse of metaphor into literal reality—a slippage that accompanies the central materialization of the novel, Beloved's embodiment. Scattered through Beloved's monologue are fragments that form the following sequence. Beloved becomes attached to the face of a woman actually on the slave ships, follows the woman's body into the sea after the sailors throw it overboard, and "joins" with it: the woman's "face comes through the water . . . her face is mine . . . I have to have my face . . . she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face" (211–13).[12] Beloved returns, then, in the body of one of the original "disappeared," and all her gestures are shadowed by a larger historical outline. Or, as she herself sees it, "All of it is now it is always now": the unnumbered losses of slavery are collected in Beloved, in a temporal space outside the linear time of history (210).[13]

But Beloved is also the one-year-old baby that Sethe killed. Morrison skillfully exploits the parallels between a spirit in search of a body and a preoedipal child who desires a merger with her mother. To both, the boundaries between persons are permeable, permitting a "join," and both project this identity confusion as a dialectic of faces. As disembodied spirit, Beloved says, "I need to find a place to be," with the words "to be" taking on all the urgency of their literal meaning. Neither her language nor her need to find a support for her existence changes, however, when it is her mother's face that she needs: "I need to find a place to be . . . [Sethe's] smiling face is the place for me" (213). The ghost's insistence on becoming embodied blends, in Morrison's song of desire, with the preverbal child's dependence on the maternal face as a mirror of her own existence.[14]

Beloved wants from words the verbal equivalent of a face that reflects her exactly as she is, reassuring her of her own existence and of her identity with her mother. In the mother-daughter dialogue that follows her monologue, language bends to Beloved's desire. While a spoken dialogue (ideally) moves toward something new, with the difference voiced by one speaker moving the other speaker away from his or her original position, the dialogue among the three women imitates a mother-infant dialectic: it is motivated not by difference but by the desire to ascertain that the other is there and that the other is the same. It "moves" only toward the stasis of interreflecting mirrors, ending in identical statements wherein like mirrors like:

> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine. (217)

What happens to language here reflects what happens in the female family circle, as Sethe (and Denver, for a time) is persuaded by Beloved's preoedipal understanding that the mother is an extension of the self: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop" (210). Punctuation disappears, leaving the sentence of each participant open to the sentence of the next speaker, and the personal pronouns *I* and *you* move toward each other, losing their difference first to become interchangeable and then to mesh in the possessive *mine*. Initially, some difference remains. Sethe and Denver say:

> You are my sister
> You are my daughter

to which Beloved responds:

> You are my face; you are me. (216)

In Sethe's and Denver's lines, normative language reflects normative family life. Separate pronouns correspond to the separate positions of family members who are connected only in the circumscribed ways authorized by conventional kinship structures. Beloved's statement, though, overthrows the classifications that locate persons in cultural space, insisting on a closer relationship than either language or family law allows: "you are me."

"You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?" With this line, Beloved completes the limited and stubborn logic of the preoedipal: if I am you, there is no leeway for separation; you *cannot* leave me. In the lines

> I have your milk . . .
> I brought your milk

the nursing connection erodes the distinctions of the symbolic by making the boundary between "you" and "me" soluble (216). Is the milk that the baby drinks part of the baby or part of the mother? Does the "I" in "I have your milk" refer to Sethe, who might be saying that she "has" (is carrying) Beloved's milk, or to Beloved, who could just as well be the "I" who speaks, saying that she "has" Sethe's milk inside her? The dedifferentiation of possessive pronouns dramatizes the impossibility of separating what belongs to the one body from what belongs to the other when the two are joined by the nipple or, rather, by the milk that flows between them, blurring borders.

Nursing serves as a figure for the totality and exclusivity of mother-daughter fusion: "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children," says Sethe, turning inward, and Beloved completes the circle, "lapping devotion like cream" (200, 243). Since Beloved has moved Paul D out and thus demolished the shadowy oedipal triangle ("the three shadows [who] held hands" [47, 49]) that threatened her hold on her mother, no father figure diverts Sethe's attention from her baby, and no "paternal signifier" points Beloved toward a larger symbolic order. She gets to live out the preoedipal wish "to be the exclusive desire of the mother" (Lacan, "Les formations" 14; qtd. in Rose 38).

The nursing paradigm does not work as the governing principle of family life, though. "Beloved . . . never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. . . . [W]hen Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (240). As preverbal infant, Beloved has not

accepted the law of symbolic substitutions with which Freud's grandson made his peace, so no partial gift will do. She wants a total union with the mother, to have her and to be her. The text literalizes a nursing baby's fantasy of oral greed consuming the breast, the mother, and all (Klein 200–01): Sethe wastes away while Beloved becomes "bigger, plumper by the day" (239).[15] This drama of oral incorporation is also appropriate to Beloved's role as the past that sucks up all Sethe's energies, leaving nothing for "a life" with a present and future (46).

"You are mine" is of course what the slave owners said, and as in the larger social order, the disregard of the other as subject, the appropriation of the other to one's own desires, leads to violence. Although now Beloved's disregard of limits eats up Sethe's life, the logic of "You are mine" originally permitted Sethe to exercise life-or-death rights over the children she conceived as "parts of her" (163).

A Maternal Symbolic

It is Denver, Sethe's surviving daughter, who in part 3 initiates the breakup of this self-consuming mother-child circle. Impelled by the need to get food for her starving mother, she moves into the larger community, but the search for food is aligned with her own "hunger" for learning. Denver joins a social order of language and exchange that both feeds her and teaches her to read. Morrison thus rewrites the entry into the symbolic in terms that retain the oral and maternal, challenging the orthodox psychoanalytic opposition between a maternal order of nurturing and a paternal order of abstract signification.

From the beginning, Denver's development reverses Lacan's maturational sequence: what Morrison explicitly calls Denver's "original hunger" is not for the mother's body but for words (118, 121). At the age of seven, after a year of reading lessons, Denver abandons language to avoid learning the truth about her mother's murder of her sister. She becomes deaf and dumb for two years, "cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear." Since the period of silence follows the period of verbal exchange, Denver's nostalgia focuses not on a past of mute connection with the mother's body but on a time of verbal *jouissance*—delight in "the capital *w*, the little *i*, the beauty of the letters in her name, the deeply mournful sentences from the Bible Lady Jones used as a textbook" (103, 102). Not for Denver the normal progress from oral to verbal, from the breast that fills the baby's mouth to verbal substitutes that never quite do so and always leave something to be desired. Instead, words give Denver the pleasures of the mouth, as the conflation of learning with eating implies: "sentences roll[ed] out like pie dough"; Lady Jones "watched her eat up a page, a rule, a figure" (121, 247).

What causes Denver to give up nourishing words for the hunger of not speaking? As a young girl, she lives out the unspeakable, as if to keep her mother's silence intact by locking it up in her body. Her empty ear and empty mouth reproduce in a corporeal language the empty place at the center of the text where her mother's story of the infanticide should be. In Freud's model of hysterical conversion, the symptom enacts the content of a repressed desire; here the paralysis of ear and throat represents not Denver's desire—her own primal hunger is for words—but her mother's wish that the story remain unspoken, the act unnamed, the memory repressed. Denver in effect closes herself up in her mother's silence. At the same time, she gives up her initial indifference to the ghost and begins to "fix [her concentration] on the baby ghost" (103). The complement of her mother's silence is the concrete presence of Beloved, the literalization of what Sethe refuses to abstract into words. When Denver goes "deaf rather than hear the answer, and [keeps] watch for the baby and [withdraws] from everything else" (105), she is retreating into her mother's world, making the rejection of speech and the obsession with the unnamed her own.

The paralysis of Denver's development shows how urgent is the need for a story that will make sense of the baby's death, mark the baby's disappearance, and lay her and the past she represents to rest. Even after Denver returns to speech and hearing, she lacks the narrative con-

text to deal with the baby's death on a conscious level, so she processes it unconsciously in "monstrous and unmanageable dreams" about her mother: "She cut my head off every night" (103, 206). The unconscious, notorious for repetition without resolution, endlessly plays out dream derivatives of the repressed signifier. Meanwhile, the nonsignifying word *thing* marks the gap left by the signifier repressed from conscious thought: "certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her" in response to questions about her mother. Freud remarks that the unconscious operates by means of "thing presentation" rather than "word presentation" ("Unconscious" 201). In Denver's idiom the unconscious marker "thing" fills the gap where conscious significance fails. It represents something in her own unconscious: "the thing that leapt up *in her* . . . was a thing that had been lying there all along" (102; my emphasis). Sethe's inability to confront and articulate her action—she hears primary process noises rather than conscious sequential thought when she tries to tell Paul D about the baby's death—results in the unsignified "thing" being lodged like a lump, undigestible and unsignifiable, in her child's unconscious, where it generates the repeated dream of decapitation.[16]

When Denver tries to leave the haunted house to get food for her mother and Beloved, she finds herself imprisoned within her mother's time—a time that, clinging to places, is always happening again: "Out there . . . were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again. . . . Denver stood on the porch . . . and couldn't leave it." She crosses the threshold into social discourse only when the voice of Baby Suggs, the ancestor, speaks out: "You mean I never told you . . . nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps?" (243–44). To a child afraid to step out into the world, the particulars of how that world damaged her grandmother and mother are hardly comforting. It is the speech act itself, the voice of the grandmother putting the past where it belongs, into oral history, that frees Denver to enter the present.

After Denver leaves the closed family circle, she goes straight to the place of verbal nurturance, the house of Lady Jones, the woman who had taught her to read some ten years earlier. However belatedly (she is by now eighteen), she takes the crucial step from the imaginary of mother-daughter fusions to the symbolic order of language and society. But this step does not entail abandoning maternal intimacy. "Oh, baby," says Lady Jones when Denver tells her about her starving mother. "[I]t was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman." Lady Jones's maternal language indicates that Denver is a child of the community, not just of her mother: "Everybody's child was in that face." She bakes raisin loaves for Denver while teaching her to read Bible verses, and "all through the spring, names appeared near or in gifts of food" (248, 246, 250, 249). Morrison thus confounds the distinction between words and good things to eat, between oral and verbal pleasures.

Denver moves into the symbolic by leaving one nurturing maternal circle for another, but there is a difference. The community, which operates as a network of mutual aid (originally, the network helped slaves escape), takes offense at Sethe's claim of maternal self-sufficiency—that "she had milk enough for all"—and demands instead a reciprocal nurturing. "To belong to a community of other free Negroes [is] to love and be loved by them, . . . [to] feed and be fed." Denver enters into this nurturing reciprocity, "pay[ing] a thank you for half a pie," "paying" for help by telling her story (100, 177, 252, 253).

Acts of maternal care also enable Sethe to move into an order of linguistic exchange. After the community of women intervenes and routs Beloved,[17] Sethe retreats into the keeping room in an imitation of Baby Suggs, who withdrew there to die. "I think I've lost my mother," Denver tells Paul D: the loss of Beloved entails the loss of Sethe, who is still attached to her baby

(266). When Paul D offers to bathe her, taking the restorative maternal role once occupied by Baby Suggs (93, 98), Sethe can only protest that she is "nothing . . . now. . . . Nothing left to bathe." Then a consciousness of her body begins to emerge: "Will he [bathe her] in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (272). Gone is her self-image as maternal life-giver (her breasts are "exhausted" now, after the ordeal of sustaining Beloved); she puts herself together anew, imitating in her fear of fragmentation the first infantile self-image, the body in pieces, that precedes the cohesion of the mirror stage and motor control (Lacan, "Mirror Stage" 4). After the body, the spirit revives. Suddenly freed from the "serious work of beating back the past," Sethe lets all the losses she has repressed flood into her mind: "that she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn't hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because her . . . back looked so bad; that her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere." Having confronted her grief consciously, Sethe quickly moves to put loss into words: "She left me" (73, 272). The act of acknowledging absence and saying "she" splits Beloved off, detaches her from the maternal body that has held the nursing connection static, entombed, and puts a signifier there, where the child's body had been.

In thus shifting from a subjectivity embedded in maternal connection to a subjectivity based on the separate positions of the linguistic register (*she* and *me*), Sethe indeed follows the Lacanian schema, in which taking the position of speaking subject requires a repudiation of continuity with the mother's body (or, for Sethe, with the nursing infant's body). But Morrison revises Lacan here, too, softening his opposition between bodily communion and the abstractions of verbal exchange: "She was my best thing," Sethe says of her lost daughter. Paul D "leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers." Sethe answers, "Me? Me?" expressing surprise and disbelief, perhaps, but also recognizing herself in the first-person singular (272–73).[18] Replacing Lacan's vision of the move into language—a move away from bodies touching to the compensations of abstract signifiers—Morrison makes physical contact the necessary support for Sethe's full acceptance of the separate subjectivity required by language systems.[19]

Though Paul D thus encircles Sethe physically, his intent is not to subsume her. The words "You are," standing alone, replace "You are mine," the hallmark of invasive identification in the mother-daughter dialogue. Paul D "wants to put his story next to hers"; the two stories may complement and complete each other (each person having lived out the missing fragment of the other's slave narrative), but they will lie "next to" each other—each whole, circumscribed, with its own beginning, middle, and end (273).[20] Difference can emerge within the space of relationship; a dialogue between self and other can replace the circular mother-daughter dialectic between same and same.

The hope at the end of the novel is that Sethe, having recognized herself as subject, will narrate the mother-daughter story and invent a language that can encompass the desperation of the slave mother who killed her daughter. Or will she? The heterosexual resolution, the enclosure of the mother in the symbolic, leaves out the preoedipal daughter, who wanders lost in the epilogue. She will not be remembered because "nobody anywhere knew her name"; she is "[d]isremembered and unaccounted for" because "they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that . . . she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too." Outcast both as victim of slavery whose death is unspeakable and as preverbal infant who has not made her way into the symbolic order, Beloved remains outside language and therefore outside narrative memory. Her story is "not a story to pass on" (274–75). Of course, the sentence is ambiguous: Beloved's story, too terrible to find resolution in the logic of narrative, cannot be passed on from teller to teller, but it also cannot "pass on," or die (35). It continues to haunt the borders of a symbolic order that excludes it.[21]

Notes

[1]Margaret Homans's notion of literalization enabled me to see how Morrison's metaphors work. "Literalization," which "occurs when some piece of overtly figurative language, a simile or an extended or conspicuous metaphor, is translated into an actual event or circumstance," is in Homans's opinion a characteristic of women's writing (30). Homans uses Nancy Chodorow's theory to challenge Lacan: because men and women develop differently, women might not polarize body and word, signifier and absent referent, to the extent that men do; thus women writers are less likely to privilege the figurative over the literal and more likely to conceive of presence as commensurate with representation (14).

[2]As a white middle-class feminist who practices psychoanalytic theory, I come to this project burdened not only by the usual guilt about my own implication in the racist structures that Morrison uncovers but also by doubts about the suitability of psychoanalytic theory for analyzing an African American text. Psychoanalytic theory is, after all, based on assumptions about family and language grounded in Western European patriarchal culture, while Morrison's novel comes out of African and African American oral and written narrative traditions (see Christian, Holloway, Page, Sale, Sitter). Elizabeth Abel's essay "Race, Class, and Psychoanalysis?" performs an important service to feminist psychoanalysis by canvassing the difficulties of applying psychoanalysis to texts produced by other cultures and the possibilities for modifying object-relations theory and Lacanian theory to include "the roles of race and class in a diversified construction of subjectivity" (184). Reading Abel's essay both focused the limitations of my position as white middle-class female reader of an African American woman's text and gave me the courage to "[k]now it, and go on out the yard" (Morrison 244)—to go on in spite of recognizing the hazards of venturing into a cultural space not my own.

[3]Hazel Carby points out that "slave narratives by women, about women, could mobilize the narrative forms of adventure and heroism normally constituted within ideologies of male sexuality" (38). Lucy Delaney, for instance, describes her mother's struggle to free her children in epic terms: "She had girded up her loins for the fight"; "others would have flinched before the obstacles which confronted her, but undauntedly she pursued her way, until my freedom was established" (35, 45). See also Claudia Tate's discussion of the idealized slave mother (the grandmother) in Jacobs's narrative (109–10).

[4]Sethe may hesitate to tell her story in part because the language available to her—a language structured by the logic of bipolar oppositions—cannot readily encompass the contradictions of motherhood under slavery. Had she access to it, Sethe would find in the discourse of actual slave mothers a language better suited to a world where "safe" from slavery can only mean "dead." Harriet Jacobs, writing from within the paradoxes of "the peculiar institution," indeed conflates maternal love and infanticide: "I would rather see [my children] killed than have them given up to [the slaveholder's] power"; "death is better than slavery" (80, 62).

Since Sethe cannot find a language of "motherlove" (132), her story remains in the rhetoric of the masters. As Mae Henderson points out, "the first [and, I would add, the only] full representation of the events surrounding the infanticide [is] figured from a collective white/male perspective, represented by schoolteacher and the sheriff" (78; see Morrison 149–51). Sethe's story is caught up in "the dominant metaphors of the master('s) narrative—wildness, cannibalism, animality, destructiveness" (Henderson 79).

[5]Readers learn about the infanticide a bit at a time from different perspectives, a technique that prevents them from making simple judgments. Maggie Sale shows that Morrison's narrative strategy forces readers to see the event from multiple perspectives and to recognize that each version depends as much on the needs of the narrator and the listener as on the historical "facts." The lack of a single definitive account "challenges readers to examine their own responses" both to Sethe's act and to the circumstances that force her to it (44).

Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, comparing Sethe and Beloved to mythic counterparts, remarks that "Sethe attempts to return the babies to perhaps a collective mother body, to devour them back into the security of womb/tomb death . . . as the ultimate act of protection" (52). Demetrakopoulos focuses on the destructive effects of Sethe's mothering, especially on her own growth as an individual.

[6]Lacan returns to the *fort-da* anecdote in *Four Fundamental Concepts* only to contradict his earlier reading. Focusing on the spool instead of the accompanying words, Lacan says that it represents an *objet petit a*—an object that is only ambiguously detached from the subject. Because Ernst holds the string that can pull back the spool, "it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him, while still remaining his, still retained" (62). In this later text, then, Lacan locates the *fort-da* episode in a zone intermediate between mother-child fusions and the clear-cut separations of the symbolic order instead of naming it, as he did earlier, "the moment . . . in which the child is born into language" ("Function" 104). Kaja Silverman and Elisabeth Bronfen read this second Lacanian interpretation as a parable for the eclipse the subject undergoes on entering language: in *Four Fundamental Concepts* the spool stands for Ernst himself, and the game rehearses his absence; he plays out the fading of the subject as, entering the order of representation, he is replaced by a signifier (Silverman 168–71; Bronfen 27). Bronfen gives a comprehensive and valuable account of various theorists' uses of the *fort-da* episode (15–38), and she adds a new dimension to standard interpretations by considering all the implications of the game's enactment of death (including Freud's use of the anecdote to compensate for the death of Sophie—his daughter and Ernst's mother—during the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*).

[7]Judith Butler helpfully summarizes the argument of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who distinguish between the work of mourning, which displaces libido onto words

that "both signify and displace [the lost] object," and "incorporation," a refusal of loss in which one preserves the lost object as a (fantasized) part of one's own body (68). In *Black Sun* Julia Kristeva also identifies the melancholic's problem as a failure to transfer libido from the bodily connection with the mother to words; she or he maintains instead an undifferentiated sense of continuity with the maternal body.

[8]Characteristically, Sethe can articulate only the part of the abuse connected with her maternal function: "[T]hey took my milk," she repeats (16, 17). In Anne Goldman's view, "schoolteacher orders [Sethe's milk] to be appropriated" because, as the one product of her labor that doesn't belong to the masters, it is the "signifier of an identity, a subjectivity, independent of white authorities" (324). Mae Henderson understands "the theft of her 'mother's milk'" as "the expropriation of [Sethe's] future—her ability to nurture and ensure the survival of the future embodied in the next generation. . . . Sethe must discover some way of regaining control of her story, her body, her progeny, her milk, her ability to nurture the future" (71). Barbara Christian points out that the nephews "milk" Sethe at the behest of schoolteacher, who wants to make the experiment as part of his "scientific observation" of slaves. Christian aligns schoolteacher, who measures slaves' body parts and observes their bodily functions with "apparently neutral" scientific curiosity, with the nineteenth-century white American intellectuals who buttressed slavery with various "scientific" treatises on the physiology of African Americans (337–38).

[9]Hortense Spillers's essay helped me understand slavery as a system of domination that mandated slaves' "absence from a subject position" while imprinting the terms of their subjugation on their bodies (67).

By emphasizing the importance of language to a "used-to-be-slave woman," Morrison takes up a central theme of slave narratives (45). "[O]nly by grasping the word" could slaves, who were considered "silently laboring brutes," take part in speech acts that would help them achieve selfhood and give shape to their subjective reality (Baker 243, 245; see also Gates xxiii–xxxi).

Mae Henderson observes, "[B]ecause it is her back (symbolizing the *presence* of her *past*) that is marked, Sethe has only been able to read herself through the gaze of others. The challenge for Sethe is to learn to read herself—that is, to configure the history of her body's text. . . . Sethe must learn how to link these traces (marks of her passage through slavery) to the construction of a personal and historical discourse" (69).

[10]Cathy Caruth summarizes theories of trauma and memory that can explain not only Sethe's inability to put the baby's death into narrative form but also the problems that other characters (notably Paul D and Baby Suggs) have in integrating the trauma of slavery. In the syndrome known as posttraumatic stress disorder, overwhelming events of the past "repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them" (418). The original event escaped understanding even as it was happening because it could not "be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge. . . . Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become . . . a 'narrative memory' that is integrated into a completed story of the past" (418–19). Morrison's narrative form brilliantly recaptures traumatic memory: the past comes back in bits—a fragment here, a fragment there. Since the "truth" of the experience "may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension," Morrison's text needs this pointillism, this fragmentation, to remain true both to the events and to "their affront to understanding" (Caruth 418–20). Philip Page shows how the circularity and fragmentation of Morrison's narrative structure parallels the indirect, piecemeal remembering of the characters. Gayle Greene also analyzes the way memory functions in *Beloved*.

[11]For a summary of Beloved's multiple relations to language and for a different view of the female family circle, see my *Reconstructing Desire* (195–200).

[12]Deborah Horvitz thinks that it is Sethe's mother who speaks in these passages, wanting to "join" with the body of her own mother (162–63). Others have speculated that the face Beloved claims as her own is that of Sethe's mother, who indeed came over on the slave ships (though she, of course, survived the voyage). These interpretations are useful in suggesting the range of what Beloved may represent: a whole line of daughters desperately wanting to "join" with the mothers wrenched away from them by slavery.

[13]Linda Anderson describes Morrison's "exploration of history's absences, of how what is unwritten and unremembered can come back to haunt us" (137). Karla Holloway points out that these absences are not accidental, that "the victim's own chronicles of these events were systematically submerged, ignored, mistrusted, or superseded by 'historians' of the era. This novel positions the consequences of black invisibility in both the records of slavery and the record-keeping as a situation of primary spiritual significance" (516–17).

[14]Morrison's account is true to a one-year-old's way of thinking, according to D. W. Winnicott. A baby looking into its mother's face imagines that it sees there the same thing its mother is looking at: its own face. The baby's still precarious sense of existence depends on the mother's mirroring face ("Mirror-Role" 112). Rebecca Ferguson also uses Winnicott's essay to explain Beloved's fixation on her mother's face (117–18). Barbara Mathieson cites Winnicott as support for her claim that Beloved's monologue mirrors the preoedipal child's conviction that its identity and its mother's identity "flow into one another as interchangeably as their faces" (2).

[15]Barbara Schapiro discusses the novel's images of orality and the gaze in the context of slavery, pointing out that "the emotional hunger, the obsessive and terrifying narcissistic fantasies" are not Beloved's alone; instead, they belong to all those denied both mothers and selves by a slave system that "either separates [a mother] from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition" (194). Thus when Sethe complains, "There was no nursing milk to call my own," she expresses her own emotional starvation in the absence of her mother, and that emptiness in turn prevents her from adequately reflecting her own daughter Denver (200, 198).

[16]Nicolas Abraham cites similar cases, in which an unarticulated secret passes directly from a parent's unconscious to a child's unconscious. The child does not consciously know what the secret is but nevertheless acts it out, driven by a thing lodged in its unconscious that fits in with neither its conscious wishes nor its unconscious fantasies. "What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (75).

[17]Missy Dehn Kubitschek identifies yet another maternal discourse in *Beloved*: she reads the women's roar that casts Beloved out as an imitation of "the sounds accompanying birth" (174). Morrison's text replaces the biblical verse, "In the beginning was the Word, . . . and the Word was God" (John 1.1), with the line, "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (259). The women's communal groan recalls women's creation of life, not God's, and overthrows the male authority of the word. Kubitschek's chapter on *Beloved* addresses Sethe's need to change the static conception of motherhood she developed under slavery.

[18]As Marianne Hirsch writes, Sethe's "subjectivity . . . can only emerge in and through human interconnection" (198). I differ with Hirsch because she ignores the hiatus in the middle of Sethe's narrative and regards Sethe as a mother who tells her story throughout (6). But Hirsch also says that Sethe's "maternal voice and subjectivity" emerge only in the concluding scene, where her "Me? Me?" implies that "she questions, at least for a moment, the hierarchy of motherhood over selfhood on which her life had rested until that moment" (7).

[19]Morrison may have D. W. Winnicott's maternal "holding environment" in mind. Like Morrison, Winnicott pictures development as a joint project of self and other (mother) rather than as a movement toward increasing separation. Only in the presence of the mother can the infant be truly "alone," in Winnicott's terms. That is, the mother's protective presence releases the infant from survival needs and enables it to claim its impulses as authentically its own—hence to catch the first glimpse of an ongoing subjectivity ("Capacity" 34). Just so, Paul D's holding guarantees a space in which Sethe can safely think any thought, feel any feeling, and finally take the leap into a different subjectivity, one grounded in language. Morrison's ideal of heterosexual relations fits the "holding fantasy" that Jessica Benjamin claims women retain from experiencing that early maternal presence: "the wish for a holding other whose presence does not violate one's space but permits the experience of one's own desire, who recognizes it when it emerges of itself" (96).

[20]Deborah Sitter describes the dialogic relation between Paul D's story and Sethe's story, showing how Paul D comes to a new definition of manhood. Kate Cummings also traces Paul D's development from a definition of masculinity that enslaves him to the white slave master who named him to an identification with Sixo's different model of manhood—a shift that culminates in his "taking on the job of mothering" Sethe. Cummings lists mothering as one of three modes of resistance, along with menacing and naming: "Mothering provides the final and most fundamental opposition, for through it the subject is reconstituted and the body reborn in the flesh" (563, 564).

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