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**Ashraf H. A.  
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Daughters Signifyin(g) History:  
The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

**D**espite the dangers of remembering the past, African American artists have insistently based a large part of their aesthetic ideal on precisely that activity. John Edgar Wideman prefaces his novel *Sent For You Yesterday* with this testament: "Past lives in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest." This insistence on the interdependence of past and present is, moreover, a political act, for it advocates a revisioning of the past as it is filtered through the present. Wideman elsewhere has asked, "What is history except people's imaginary recreation?" Racial memories, he suggests, "exist in the imagination." They are in fact a record of "certain collective experiences" that "have been repeated generation after generation."<sup>1</sup>

As Toni Morrison has said, "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor . . . we are, in fact, lost." Keeping in touch with the ancestor, she adds, is the work of a reconstructive memory: "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way." This concern with the appearance, with the ideology of transmission, is, though, only part of the overall trajectory of her revisionary project. Eventually her work, she states, must "bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded."<sup>2</sup> It must, that is, signify on the past and make it palatable for a present politic—eschewing that part of the past which has been constructed out of a denigrative ideology and reconstructing that part which will serve the present.

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Morrison is both participant and theorist of this black aesthetic of remembering, and she has recently set out some of the mandates for establishing a form of literary theory that will truly accommodate African American literature—a theory based on an inherited culture, an inherited “history,” and the understanding of the ways that any given artistic work negotiates between those cultural/historical worlds it inhabits. Moreover, not only does Morrison, following the line of Pauline Hopkins, delineate the “dormant inmost feelings in that history”; she takes up, delicately yet resolutely, the task of reviving the very figures of that history.<sup>3</sup>

By taking a historical personage—a daughter of a faintly famous African American victim of racist ideology—and constructing her as a hopeful presence in a contemporary setting, Morrison offers an introjection into the fields of revisionist historiography and fiction. She makes articulate a victim of a patriarchal order in order to criticize that order. Yet she portrays an unrelenting hopefulness in that critique. She does not inherit, as Deborah McDowell maintains some writers do, “the orthodoxy of victimage,” nor does she reduce her narrative to anything resembling what Henry Louis Gates Jr. has called a “master plot of victim and victimizer.”<sup>4</sup> She, like Ralph Ellison, returns to history not to find claims for reparation or reasons for despair, but to find “something subjective, willful, and complexly and compellingly human”—to find, that is, something for her art. She does so, moreover, by doing what Hortense Spillers claims Ishmael Reed does with the discursive field of slavery in his *Flight to Canada*: “construct[ing] and reconstruct[ing] repertoires of usage out of the most painful human/historical experience.”<sup>5</sup> In articulating a reconstructive—critical and hopeful—feminist voice within the fields of revisionist historiography and contemporary fiction, what Morrison does is create daughters Signifyin(g) history.

### **Raising *Beloved*: A Requiem that is a Resurrection**

Morrison thought that her most recent book would be the least read of her novels because it would be perceived to be a work dealing with slavery, an institution that is willingly placed under erasure by what she calls a “national amnesia”: “I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember.” But *Beloved*

is not about slavery as an institution; it is “about those *anonymous* people called slaves.”<sup>6</sup>

Morrison’s sense of ambivalence, of wishing to forget and remember at the same time, is enacted in her attitude to the story and its characters. Speaking about the writing of *Beloved*, she declares her wish to invoke all those people who are “unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried,” and go about “properly, artistically, burying them.” However, this burial’s purpose, it would appear, is to bring them back into “living life.” This tension between needing to bury the past as well as needing to revive it, between a necessary remembering and an equally necessary forgetting, exists in both the author and her narrative. We might better understand that tension by attending to the author’s construction of the scenes of inspiration leading her to write this novel.

Morrison has said that the idea of *Beloved* was inspired by “two or three little fragments of stories” that she had “heard from different places.”<sup>7</sup> The first was the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in January 1856 escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River, and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. She was pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers. They surrounded the house where she, her husband Robert, and their four children were harbored. When the posse battered down the door and rushed in, Robert shot at them and wounded one of the officers before being overpowered. According to Levi Coffin, “at this moment, Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best. She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work.”<sup>8</sup> Margaret Garner chose death for both herself and her most beloved rather than accept being forced to return to slavery and have her children suffer an institutionalized dehumanization. The story of Margaret Garner was eventually to become the historical analogue of the plot of *Beloved*.<sup>9</sup>

Morrison said that what this story made her realize was that “the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves” (“Conversation,” 585). The story of Margaret Garner stayed with Morrison, representing, albeit unclearly, something about feminine selflessness. It took another story to clarify more precisely what Margaret Garner and her story meant.

Morrison found that story in Camille Billops’s *The Harlem Book of the*

*Dead*—an album featuring James Van Der Zee’s photographs of Harlem funerals. These were photographs, Morrison has said, that had a “narrative quality.” One photograph and its attendant story in particular caught her attention:

In one picture, there was a young girl lying in a coffin and he [Van Der Zee] says that she was eighteen years old and she had gone to a party and that she was dancing and suddenly she slumped and they noticed there was blood on her and they said, “What happened to you?” And she said, “I’ll tell you tomorrow. I’ll tell you tomorrow.” That’s all she would say. And apparently her ex-boyfriend or somebody who was jealous had come into the party with a gun and a silencer and shot her. And she kept saying, “I’ll tell you tomorrow” because she wanted him to get away. And he did, I guess; anyway, she died. (“Conversation,” 584)

After reading the narrative of Margaret Garner, Toni Morrison had thought she glimpsed an opaque truth that she had always known, somehow: “But that moment, that decision was a piece, a tail of something that was always around, and it didn’t get clear for me until I was thinking of another story.”

When Van Der Zee provided that next story, Morrison saw clearly what she’d glimpsed through a darker glass: “Now what made those stories connect, I can’t explain, but I do know that, in both instances, something seemed clear to me. A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied” (“Conversation,” 584). In 1978, nine years before the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison started attempting to formulate the terms of that tension between remembering and forgetting, burying and reviving. In the Foreword to *The Harlem Book of the Dead* she writes: “The narrative quality, the intimacy, the humanity of his photographs are stunning, and the proof, if any is needed, is in this collection of photographs devoted exclusively to the dead about which one can only say, ‘How living are his portraits of the dead.’ So living, so ‘undead,’ that the prestigious writer, Owen Dodson, is stirred to poetry in which life trembles in every metaphor.”<sup>10</sup> One of Owen Dodson’s “living” poems is on the page facing the picture of the young girl as she lies in her coffin:

They lean over me and say:  
 “Who deathed you who,  
 who, who, who, who. . . .  
 I whisper: “Tell you presently . . .  
 Shortly . . . this evening . . .  
 Tomorrow . . .”  
 Tomorrow is here  
 And you out there safe.  
 I’m safe in here, Tootsie. (52–53)

If Van Der Zee’s photographs give renewed life to the dead, so does Dodson’s poetry give renewed voice. Across from a picture of a girl in a coffin resides her living voice, her expression of the safety of death. As early as 1973, Morrison had been concerned with making the dead articulate. When Sula dies, she feels her face smiling: “‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nell.’”<sup>11</sup>

In 1987, with *Beloved*, Morrison goes further in giving the dead voice, in remembering the forgotten. *Beloved* is, in effect, a requiem that is a resurrection. The most obvious example of this commemoration is Beloved herself, the ghost of Margaret Garner’s unnamed child: “So I just imagined the life of a dead girl which was the girl that Margaret Garner killed, the baby girl that she killed. . . . And I call her Beloved so that I can filter all these confrontations and questions that she has in that situation” (“Conversation,” 585). Beloved is more than just a character in the novel, though. She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly: “Everybody knew 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.”<sup>12</sup>

In the end, though, Beloved is not the most important character in Morrison’s revisionist strategy. That character is Denver, the other daughter. Morrison’s original intent in the novel, she said in 1985, was to develop the narrative of Beloved into the narrative of Denver. First she would imagine the life of the murdered child, “to extend her life, you know, her search, her quest, all the way through as long as I care to go, into the twenties where it switches to this other girl.” This “other girl,” Denver, is the site of hope in Morrison’s novel. She is the daughter of history. Nonetheless, as Morrison emphasizes, even when Denver becomes the

focus of the narrative's attention, "Beloved will be there also" ("Conversation," 585). Before turning to the novel, and determining how Morrison inscribes hope into a critical revision of history, let us return briefly to the narrative of Margaret Garner in order to see the history that she revises.

### **Towards *Beloved*: Margaret Garner**

It was sometime in January 1856 that Margaret Garner attempted her escape and killed her daughter. The story and the ensuing court case were reported in the Cincinnati newspapers and reported again in *The Liberator* in March 1856. Another detailed narrative appeared in the *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* in 1856.<sup>13</sup> The newspaper coverage may have been motivated by a variety of reasons, some of them, one intuitively, having to do with the exoticism of the story. In much the same way, Jim Trueblood of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* becomes the focus of white attention after he commits incest with his daughter:

The white folks took up for me. And the white folks took to coming out here to see us and talk with us. Some of 'em was big white folks, too, from the big school way across the State. Asked me lots 'bout what I thought 'bout things, and 'bout my folks and the kids, and wrote it all down in a book. . . . That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a niggah he was.<sup>14</sup>

In *Beloved* Morrison has Paul D respond to the media attention Sethe gets for infanticide in much the same way as the "invisible man" responds to Trueblood's story:

Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary—something whitepeople would find interesting,

truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. And it must have been hard to find news about Negroes worth the breath catch of a white citizen of Cincinnati. (155–56)<sup>15</sup>

As Levi Coffin noted, the Margaret Garner case “attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy” than any other he’d known (I’ll return to the importance of this critique of print media later).

The case became a forum for “that noble anti-slavery lawyer” John Jolliffe, counsel for the defence, to argue that the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was unconstitutional. Lucy Stone, who visited Garner in jail, spoke to the crowd outside her trial, describing Garner as a quintessentially American hero: “I thought the spirit she manifested was the same with that of our ancestors to whom we had erected a monument at Bunker Hill—the spirit that would rather let us all go back to God than back to slavery.” A year and a half after her trial, Garner had become a symbol for what Frederick Douglass called his “philosophy of reform.” Addressing an assembly celebrating the twenty-third anniversary of West Indian Emancipation, Douglass proclaimed:

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. . . . This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them. . . . The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. . . . If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.

Hence, my friends, every mother who, like Margaret Garner, plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian Slavery, should be held and honored as a benefactress.<sup>16</sup>

As late as 1892, the story of Margaret Garner could be used to signify the extreme measures a person would take to escape what the lawyer



Jolliffe called the “seething hell of American slavery” and Douglass the “hell of our Christian Slavery.”

In Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Margaret Garner’s case symbolized in the heroine’s life what the author calls “school-girl notions.” Iola is the daughter of the slaveowner Eugene Leroy and his wife Marie, who has “negro blood in her veins”; Iola, when she attends school in the North, does not yet know her maternal racial background. In discussion with her fellow school-girls in the Northern school, Iola defends the institution of slavery, claiming that their slaves are “content.” One of her schoolfriends disagrees: “‘I don’t know,’ was the response of her friend, ‘but I do not think that that slave mother who took her four children, crossed the Ohio River on the ice, killed one of the children and attempted the lives of the other two, was a contented slave.’”<sup>17</sup> Significantly, when Iola does discover her racial heritage she begins a mission of education, the biggest part of which is the paper she reads to the Council Meeting at Mr. Stillman’s house, a paper entitled “Education of Mothers.” Nameless now, Margaret Garner had become a political symbol for discontent. By 1948, Herbert Aptheker would cite the Margaret Garner case to argue why “the Negro woman so often urged haste in slave plottings.” By 1981, Angela Y. Davis would echo him in arguing that the Margaret Garner case demonstrated not only the willingness of slave women to organize insurrections but also the unique desperation of the slave mother.<sup>18</sup>

By 1987, Margaret Garner’s story would inspire a Pulitzer prize-winning novel. Morrison has said that she does not know what eventually happened to Margaret Garner.<sup>19</sup> There are conflicting reports. According to Coffin and *The Liberator*, while Garner was being shipped back to Kentucky she jumped overboard with her baby; she was saved but her baby drowned. According to a report in the Cincinnati *Chronicle* and the Philadelphia *Press*, Margaret and her husband Robert worked in New Orleans and then on Judge Bonham’s plantation in Mississippi until Margaret died of typhoid fever in 1858.<sup>20</sup> Whatever her fate, at Morrison’s hands she has been buried in order to be resurrected into a new life, and she has been remembered in order that the institution she suffered may be forgotten.

### Signifyin(g) on History

*Beloved*, according to Stanley Crouch, one of its harshest reviewers, “means to prove that Afro-Americans are the result of a cruel determinism.”<sup>21</sup> This criticism is a good place to start our discussion of the novel,

not because Crouch has hit upon some truth regarding *Beloved* or Morrison (he has not) but because he demonstrates the sort of conclusion a reader may reach if unburdened by knowledge of the historical place of *Beloved*'s writing, its historical analogue, and its critical position in the African American aesthetic and politics of remembering history.

*Beloved* is the product of and a contribution to a historical moment in which African American historiography is in a state of fervid revision. The debate currently rages between those who argue that slavery led to the "infantilization" of adult Africans because the most significant relationship in any slave's life was that between the slave and the master, and those who argue that slaves formed viable internal communities, family structures, and protective personae that allowed them to live rich, coherent lives within their own system of values.<sup>22</sup> One premise underlying this debate is the question of whether slaves were acquiescent or resistant to the institution, whether they conformed to the "Sambo" or "Mammy" stereotypes who accepted their stations or whether they were in perpetual opposition to them—both in daily resistance and in sensational insurrections.<sup>23</sup> It is within this revisionary fray that *Beloved* may profitably be examined. As I hope to demonstrate below, the novel both remembers the victimization of the ex-slaves who are its protagonists and asserts the healing and wholeness that those protagonists carry with them in their communal lives. Crouch, unfortunately, reads the novel as if it were a rendition only of victimization, only of determinism; in other words, he misreads it.

Morrison has on more than one occasion asserted that she writes from a double perspective of accusation and hope, of criticizing the past and caring for the future. She claims that this double perspective is the perspective of a "Black woman writer," that is, "one who look[s] at things in an unforgiving/loving way . . . , writing to repossess, re-name, re-own." In *Beloved*, this perspective is described as "the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses" (271). It is on precisely this issue of a dual vision that she marks the distinction between black men's writing and black women's: "what I found so lacking in most black writing by men that seems to be present in a lot of black women's writing is a sense of joy, in addition to oppression and being women or black or whatever."<sup>24</sup>

Morrison writes out of a dual perspective in order to re-possess, as I've suggested earlier, by remembering the ancestor, not only an aesthetic act but an act of historical recovery: "roots are less a matter of geography than sense of shared history; less to do with place, than with inner

space.”<sup>25</sup> Each act of writing a novel is for her an act of discovering deep within herself some relationship to a “collective memory.” Memory itself, write Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, is for African Americans “an instrument of survival.” It is an instrument, writes Morrison, that can be traced back to an African heritage: “it’s true what Africans say: ‘The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember.’”<sup>26</sup>

In the novel this truth is expressed by Sethe’s mother-in-law. Baby Suggs knows that “death was anything but forgetfulness” (4). That remembering is both a resurrection and a pain is testified to by Amy Denver, who assisted in the birthing of Sethe’s daughter: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.” The daughter Amy delivered testifies to that: “A truth for all times, thought Denver” (35). Let us now turn our attention to the novel in which all the double perspectives of this black woman writer are expressed—remembering and forgetting, accusing and embracing, burying and reviving, joy and oppression.

### Reading *Beloved*

The obvious place to begin a reading tracing Morrison’s signifyin(g) on the story of Margaret Garner is the site of infanticide. One of the recurrent tropes of the African American novel of slavery is the possible response to an institution attempting to render meaningless the mother-child relationship. In William Wells Brown’s *Clotelle*, the slave mother Isabella would rather commit suicide than face slavery for herself and her children. Hunted by a crowd of dogs and slavecatchers, Isabella leaps into the Potomac as an act symbolizing the “unconquerable love of liberty which the human heart may inherit.” The chapter is entitled “Death Is Freedom.”<sup>27</sup> In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, slavery is described as an institution in which only death can give freedom. As Amram tells Caleb, “you are up against a hard game when you got to die to beat it.”<sup>28</sup> It is an even harder game, Morrison would add, when you have to kill what you love most.

Coffin explicitly states Margaret’s motivation: “the slave mother . . . killed her child rather than see it taken back to slavery” (557). Like Harriet Jacobs, Margaret, in Coffin’s reading of her history, sees death as a better alternative than slavery. “It seemed to me,” writes Jacobs, “that I would rather see them [her children] killed than have them given up to his [the slaveowner’s] power. . . . When I lay down beside my child, I felt

how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about.”<sup>29</sup>

Sethe killed Beloved, according to Stamp Paid, because she “was trying to outhurt the hurters.” “She love those children” (243). Loving as a slave, according to Paul D (whom Stamp Paid is trying to persuade with his assessment of Sethe’s motivation), meant loving small, loving in an unobvious way so that whatever was loved did not become part of a technique of punishment. Paul D’s advice, and his credo, was to “love just a little bit” so that when the slave owners took whatever or whoever the slave loved and “broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (45). Ella, another ex-slave who was loved by no one and who considered “love a serious disability” (256), lived by the simple dictum “Don’t love nothing” (92). When Paul D learns of Sethe’s infanticide he tells her that her love is “too thick.” She responds by telling him that “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (164). Although Paul D lives by his philosophy of loving small as a protective measure, he knows what Sethe means. “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). Although Paul D knows the conditions of freedom and Sethe knows the conditions of love, each has to learn to claim that freedom, to claim that love, and thereby to claim genuine community and begin the process of healing.

Sethe’s process of healing occurs when she acknowledges her act and accepts her responsibility for it while also recognizing the reason for her act within a framework larger than that of individual resolve. Here, perhaps, is Morrison’s most powerful introjection into the Margaret Garner story—the establishing of a context for Sethe’s act. Sethe’s own mother kills all the children fathered by the whites who raped her. As Nan, Sethe’s grandmother tells her, “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them” (62). Another important person helping Sethe through the exorcising of her painful memories is Ella, who, it is hinted, has also committed infanticide. By placing such a frame around Sethe’s story, Morrison insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment—the wrongness of assuming a transhistorical ethic outside a particular historical moment. Morrison is not justifying Sethe’s actions;

she is writing about them in the only way she knows how—through eyes that accuse and embrace, through a perspective that criticizes while it rejoices. Towards that end, she has constructed two daughterly presences in her novel who help Sethe remember and forget her personal history, who embody the dual perspective of critique and rejoicing.

Beloved, the incarnation of the ghost of the murdered daughter, is the most obvious revisionist construction in Morrison's novel. Through Beloved, she signifies on history by resurrecting one of its anonymous victims. When Beloved comes back to haunt Sethe for murdering her, Beloved becomes the incarnated memory of Sethe's guilt. Moreover, she is nothing but guilt, a symbol of an unrelenting criticism of the dehumanizing function of the institution of slavery. In this, she is the daughter representing a severe critique, demonstrating the determinism in slave history. She represents, however, only half of Morrison's work: the accusing glare, the unforgiving perspective, the need to forget—"It was not a story to pass on." There is another daughter in the novel, another daughter of history—representing the embracing glance, the loving view, the need to remember.

When Sethe first sees the reincarnated Beloved, her "bladder filled to capacity." She runs immediately to the outhouse, but does not make it: "Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water Amy said, 'Hold on, Lu. You going to sink us you keep that up.' But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (51). She would later, in a retrospective moment, remember this scene in trying to discover who Beloved could be (132). What is worth noticing, though, is that at that precise moment she does not remember the birth of Beloved but the birth of Denver. Denver is the fictional recreation of Margaret Garner's other daughter, the daughter who survives. Coffin describes Garner and this daughter in the courtroom: "The babe she held in her arms was a little girl, about nine months old, and was much lighter in color than herself, light enough to show a red tinge in its cheek" (562–63).<sup>30</sup> In *Beloved*, Denver becomes the daughter of hope.

Denver is the first to recognize that Beloved is the incarnation of the ghost that had haunted 124; and she is also the first who lives through that recognition and develops the understanding necessary for an affirmative return to life. Like everyone else in the novel, she must learn to confront

the past in order to face the future. She, too, must deal with what she has been repressing for most of her life: “the hurt of the hurt world” (28). Denver begins, like her mother, by attempting to prevent the past from intruding upon her life: “she had her own set of questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested Denver” (119). Denver is not able to avoid the past for long, though, because the past becomes an immediate pain to her present life and an incipient danger to her future. What Denver must do is remember, and she must do so by revising her memory—her history and her mother’s history—in a collective amnesia.<sup>31</sup> Denver is pre-eminently in this novel the signifyin(g) daughter.

The first recognition Denver has of the danger Beloved represents to Sethe—the danger of the past’s taking over the present—occurs in the Clearing. When Sethe goes to the Clearing to commune with her dead mother-in-law Baby Suggs, a spiritual force begins to choke her. Sethe reflects on the moment: “But one thing for sure, Baby Suggs had not choked her as first she thought. Denver was right, and walking in the dappled tree-light, clearer-headed now—away from the enchantment of the Clearing—Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own” (98). Denver will later accuse Beloved, who is the incarnated memory of her own murder, of choking her mother:

“You did it, I saw you,” said Denver.

“What?”

“I saw your face. You made her choke.”

“I didn’t do it.”

“You told me you loved her.”

“I fixed it, didn’t I? Didn’t I fix her neck?”

“After. After you choked her neck.”

“I kissed her neck. I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it.”

“I saw you.” Denver grabbed Beloved’s arm.

“Look out, girl,” said Beloved and, snatching her arm away, ran ahead as fast as she could along the stream that sang on the other side of the woods. (101)

For Denver, this is the first of her two crucial moments. She has not gone to the other side of the woods in years because she has willfully isolated herself in the house and the yard: “124 and the field behind it were all the world she knew or wanted.” There had been a time when “she had known more and wanted to.”

Reflecting on what she thinks she has just witnessed—Beloved’s attempt to choke her mother—and looking out at Beloved’s flight, Denver remembers the moment that caused her willful isolation. When she was seven she had wandered beyond the confines of the house and yard and entered the children’s class Lady Jones conducted. For a full year, she learned to write and read: “She was so happy she didn’t even know she was being avoided by her classmates—that they made excuses and altered their pace not to walk with her. It was Nelson Lord—the boy as smart as she was—who put a stop to it; who asked her the question about her mother that put chalk, the little *i* and all the rest those afternoons held, out of reach forever.” Denver never went back to Lady Jones’s, but she also did not ask anybody whether Nelson Lord’s question was true. Reflecting now both on the latest incident in the Clearing and on the moment Nelson Lord had ended her adventurousness forever, Denver begins to confront questions regarding the ways the past shapes the present—she begins to ask herself whether she has a complicitous role in her mother’s history: “Walking toward the stream, beyond her green bush house, she lets herself wonder what if Beloved really decided to choke her mother. Would she let it happen? Murder, Nelson Lord had said. ‘Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?’” (104). It was “the second question that made it impossible for so long to ask Sethe about the first.” Because Denver knows her mother’s loving care, she finds it impossible to ask about the moment Sethe might have expressed her love murderously.

At age seven, Denver chose not to ask Sethe to explain; she preferred the comfort she received from the ghost haunting 124: “Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (103). It is Denver who hears and identifies her dead sister’s presence in the ghost. And by recognizing the ghost’s identity, Denver begins the process of confronting the ramifications of the past: “The return of Denver’s hearing, cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear, cut on by the sound of her dead sister trying to climb the stairs, signaled another shift in the fortunes of the people of 124. From then on the presence was full of spite” (103–04). For ten years, Denver prefers to live in the ambivalence wrought of suspicion without desiring any explanation.

At age fifteen, confronted with the incarnated memory of her mother’s crime, Denver again chooses the ghost: “The display she witnessed at the Clearing shamed her because the choice between Sethe and Beloved was without conflict.” Ironically, although Denver thinks that the present

alone is what interests her, she luxuriates in the past, in dwelling in a shadowy history which she is unwilling to confront or confirm. Now, though, she has realized that she must make a choice—a choice she defers for now but must eventually make.

She makes an initial choice based on her fear for her own life: “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it” (205). Because of this, Denver feels the onus of protecting Beloved: “It’s all on me, now, but she can count on me. I thought she was trying to kill her that day in the Clearing. Kill her back. But then she kissed her neck and I have to warn her about that. Don’t love her too much. Don’t. Maybe it’s still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell her. I have to protect her” (206). There is only so long Denver can nurture this resentment; there is only so much the past can inform her living present. Beloved becomes demanding: “Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (240). It takes an act of seeing how this memory is literally consuming her mother for Denver to realize that her initial choice must be altered: “Then Sethe spit up something she had not eaten and it rocked Denver like gunshot. The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (243).

This is the second crucial moment in Denver’s life, when she must assume responsibility for having nurtured resentment, for having kept the past alive for selfish reasons. She will now have to leave 124 and face the larger community. She will have to stop dwelling on her mother’s history and recognize the larger communal history of slavery’s suffering. In doing so, she must understand her mother’s act in light of a larger narrative. Beloved had responded to Denver’s accusation of choking Sethe’s neck by referring to an institution: “I didn’t choke it. The circle of iron choked it.” Slavery, Beloved is saying in a lower frequency, is the thing to blame. Denver will have to learn to listen to that lower frequency.

As she stands on the steps, Denver remembers her grandmother’s final words: “Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout.” Standing uneasily on the steps she has not left since Nelson Lord asked her that painful question, Denver is visited by Baby Suggs’s ghost:

Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your



daddy? You don't remember 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? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

"There ain't."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

"Know it": historical knowledge, if it isn't the defense, *is* at least the only way to integrity. It is a knowledge of the larger collective—of her father, her mother, her grandmother, Carolina, Sweet Home, slavery. It is understanding the forces of slavery that compelled her mother to do what she did. There is another story besides *Beloved's*, a larger narrative besides her family's, a deeper pain than suspicion and fear and spite. She follows her grandmother's advice and leaves the yard. By leaving the house, she enables herself to know.

She is first of all initiated into maturity and then understanding. The first place she goes is to Lady Jones's. When Lady Jones recognizes her and says, "Oh, baby . . . Oh, baby," Denver passes an indefinable threshold: "Denver looked up at her. She did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman. The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others" (248). Those paper scraps represent her place in history—both within the family as a literate daughter of an unlettered mother and within the culture as a remembering being.

A woman now, Denver begins to glean the inner meaning of a larger reality, to comprehend the dangers that dwelling on the past holds. Denver's discovery, though, occurs when she becomes imbricated into a story Sethe is telling *Beloved*. The passage in which Sethe's relationship to *Beloved* is delineated must be quoted in full:

*Denver thought* she understood the connection between her mother and *Beloved*: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; *Beloved* was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Sethe's greatest fear was *the same one Denver had in the beginning*—that *Beloved* might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw

under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. . . . This and much more, *Denver* heard her say from her corner chair, trying to persuade Beloved, *the one and only person she felt she had to convince*, that what she had done was right because it came from true love. (251, emphasis added)

This moment of understanding, the moment when Sethe articulates her recognition of the reasons she killed Beloved, is filtered through Denver's hearing and understanding; it begins with Denver's thinking and ends with her hearing. Although Sethe thinks she is attempting to convince only one daughter of her love, in reality she is convincing the other daughter too. Denver had, "in the beginning," wished Beloved to stay because Beloved represented the ambiguity she felt about her mother—because Beloved was an accusation always readily available. Denver has since understood that because of a larger communal history, her mother's deed might not be so heinous as she had at first thought. That is not to say that Morrison is trying to negate the guilt Sethe feels, or even attempting to palliate it by reference to an institutional context. Rather, by having both of the daughters listen to Sethe's realization, Morrison represents for us the ambivalent duality of what she considers primarily the black woman writer's way of looking at the world—as she puts it, "in an unforgiving/loving way." Each daughter in this novel represents one way. Beloved accuses while Denver embraces; Beloved is unforgiving while Denver is loving; Beloved will be "Disremembered and unaccounted for" while Denver is the source of remembering. Two things occur when Denver finally follows Baby Suggs's advice and steps out of 124—one that leads to a personal healing and another that leads to a communal.

First, she tells the community that Beloved, the murdered baby, has returned to punish Sethe. It is a story that must be narrated for its subjects to be cured: “Nobody was going to help her unless she told it—told all of it” (253). The community responds in three ways: “those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through” (255). It is Ella, finally, who initiates the exorcism of Beloved; and it is significant that Ella is the one to do this. First of all, Ella, like the matured Denver, has outgrown the need to dwell on the past: “Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe’s crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (256). Moreover, Ella too has a place in the larger narrative of slavery. Her puberty was spent “in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called ‘the lowest yet.’ It was ‘the lowest yet’ who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities” (256). And Ella’s personal history has hints of infanticide in it too: “Ella had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist. She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet.’ It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working” (258–59). By registering her narrative within a framework of determinism and forgiveness, Ella has learned how to free herself. She offers that possibility to Sethe. For twenty-eight days, Sethe had been free—the time between crossing the Ohio River and the time she killed her baby daughter. Sethe had known then that “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). In that twenty-eight days, she had claimed herself. After murdering Beloved, she lost that claim. Ella, by exorcising Beloved, by not allowing the past to consume the present, offers Sethe the opportunity to reclaim herself. In the end Sethe does, and does so by an act of community. In this her life is following the pattern established by her daughter Denver.

Denver’s personal healing is attested to when she meets Nelson Lord for the first time since he had asked her the question that had deafened her. This is the second thing that happens when she leaves 124. She sees Nelson: “All he did was smile and say, ‘Take care of yourself, Denver,’

but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind" (252). This encounter demonstrates Denver's growth. She knows now her shared history—her family's, her community's, her culture's. As much as Nelson's original question had been the closure of language for her, so now is his amiable comment a renewal of communication.

Sethe, after Denver, will make a successful return to life in the same way. When she told Paul D how she killed Beloved, he made a comment that caused a forest to spring up between them (165). It will take Paul D's own education, and Sethe's attempts to understand herself and make Beloved understand her actions, before they are able to reunite. Paul D finally realizes that he "wants to put his story next to hers." Not only is this an act of a shared narrative, but it is also an affirmation that Sethe has a claim to herself:

"Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

He 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.

"Me? Me?" (273)

Like Denver, who finds the ability to discover herself in Nelson Lord's words, Sethe finds the ability to reclaim, to recover, herself in Paul D's. Before she told Paul about Beloved, she had thought that theirs was a shared narrative: "Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine, and tell again. The things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word shapes for—well, it would come in time" (99). The full story does come in time, but it is a product of extreme stress and pain, of the effort to remember what each desires to forget. It is a story told in a language that deafens while it enlightens: "This was not a story to pass on."

### **Hearing *Beloved***

It is a story, however, that does get passed on—and it is passed on through the ear. While Sethe thinks she is trying to convince only Beloved of the reasons she committed murder, Denver is *listening*. As I suggested earlier, Denver is the filtering ear for Sethe's process of self-discovery: "This and much more Denver heard her say. . . ." It is impor-

tant that Denver, the signifyin(g) daughter, *hears* what Sethe has to say. It alerts us to how this novel situates itself in the African American literary tradition. *Beloved* belongs to that class of novels Gates characterizes as “speakerly texts”—those texts “whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition” and to produce the “illusion of oral narration.”<sup>32</sup> Within the structure of the broadest frame of *Beloved*’s “speakerly text” there exists what we might call the “aural being.” It is this being who represents our belonging to this novel, and this being is represented within the novel by the signifyin(g) daughter.

Peter Brooks has suggested that meaning in novels resides in the dialogical relationship between “tellers and listeners,” in the transmission of the “‘horror,’ the taint of knowledge gained.” The reader of narratives, that is, is “solicited not only to understand the story, but to complete it.”<sup>33</sup> That reader—when constructed within the novel, that aural being—is, like Marlowe’s auditor, a creation of the speakerly text. Moreover, and this is distinctly an aspect of the African American literary tradition, the voice of the speakerly text is a product of a generational memory. We may find the protocols for this sort of generational memory represented in at least two other novels written by African American women: Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)—the prototype, Gates tells us, of the speakerly text—and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986).

*Beloved* is also a novel that constructs its ideal “listener.” Denver will tell and re-tell the story that she now understands. Like Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Denver uses the knowledge of “horror,” transmitted to her aurally, to perform a healing narrative—orally. And, like Pheoby, Denver represents the implied community of ideal readers, the “aural being.” What, finally, Denver is to *Beloved* is the space for hearing the tale of infanticide with a degree of understanding—both as sister of the murdered baby and as the living daughter of the loving mother. Denver, that is, is a site of participation.

Morrison has said on various occasions that she writes into her narratives the “places and spaces so that the reader can participate.”<sup>34</sup> It is a dialogic form that she has suggested is akin to music and to black preaching. These are art forms which, she suggests, are part of the repertoire of “Black art,” which is difficult to define but does have “major characteristics,”

One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of

course, but one should be able to hear them as well. It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and *to cry and to accede or to change and to modify*—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered. In the same way that a musician’s music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience. Now in a book. . . . I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. (Emphasis added)<sup>35</sup>

She intends her novels to be healing, belonging to a form she calls “village literature”—literature that should “clarify the roles that have become obscured,” literature that is able to “identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not,” a literature, finally, that is able to “give nourishment.”<sup>36</sup> The novel as a form of “Black art” works with history as its subject in order to criticize and to revise—to cry and to modify.

Morrison claims that it is precisely because the black oral historical tradition is now a thing of the past that the African American novel is so necessary: “the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before. . . . We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago.”<sup>37</sup> Those stories must have a place in African American culture, and they’ve found their place in the novel. The novel becomes for Morrison what Aunt Sue was for Langston Hughes—the site of an oral history passed from generation to generation:

And the dark-faced child, listening,  
Knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories.  
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories  
Out of any book at all,  
But that they came  
Right out of her own life.<sup>38</sup>

Because all those ancestors, like Aunt Sue, are no longer available, there must evolve within the African American tradition an art form that gives them voice. *Beloved* is but one more novel in a tradition doing just that. But it also does one more thing: it situates itself not only theoretically, but also performatively, as an oral literature.

I noted earlier that Morrison provides a criticism of print media through Paul D's assessment of what newspapers will or will not write about black people. Like other novels in the tradition of African American letters, Morrison criticizes the ideological imperative of print media in order to establish the value of oral historical relation. This criticism of print media is very much part of the overall revisionist motive in criticizing the historiography of slavery. It is, after all, only when slave narratives and slave accounts began to be taken seriously as historical documents that the other side of slavery could be articulated. The contemporary novel of signifyin(g) history, or the speakerly text, represents this struggle for the validation of orality. In Williams's *Dessa Rose*, for instance, the slave Dessa is given two voices—one as the white pro-slavery polemicist Adam Nehemiah “reconstructs” her voice in his journal, and the other as she orally tells her story to her grandchildren in her own voice. Dessa, that is, can save herself only by telling a story different from the one she is written to fit, by refusing to be written and asserting herself in voice.<sup>39</sup> In *Beloved* it is schoolteacher who uses writing in a detrimental way. Schoolteacher attempts to read and write Sethe as a subhuman thing by listing what he calls her “animal” characteristics alongside her human ones. Sethe resolved that “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (251). Like Dessa, Sethe refuses to allow the written to usurp her humanity, and she finds that her humanity is best represented by the spoken word. To discover how *Beloved* is constructed to represent its own orality, we must first of all delineate the variety of oral communities in the novel.

Paul D belongs to a chain gang that had its own language, signifying nothing to those who didn't belong to its community: “They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings” (108). Like the chain gang described by Frederick Douglass, the slaves would sing songs that “to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves.”<sup>40</sup> But when he enters the community of Sethe and her two daughters, Paul D finds himself unable to comprehend their language: “Hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn't in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break” (132). When Sethe first converses with Ella, after escaping from the Sweet Home plantation, what Sethe says yields up a surplus of meaning to Ella because of her ear for the silences: “she listened for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions

they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind” (92). When Ella initiates the exorcism with a holler, language becomes wholly oral: “In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (259).

Finally, though, the most important oral community in this novel is comprised of those able to understand the mode of discourse necessary to relating the crux of this story—the murder of Beloved:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized the schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. 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. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (163)

Paul D has trouble understanding this discourse, just as he had trouble understanding the code existing between Sethe and her daughters. “At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. . . . Then he thought, No, it's the sound of her voice; it's too near” (161). Eventually, Paul D understands only that Sethe murdered Beloved; he suggests that it was because her love was “too thick.” It will take him the rest of the novel to understand that for Sethe “Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all” (164).

It takes memory and articulation for Sethe to understand her own action. What she had to remember is another oral community between her grandmother and herself; “she was remembering something she forgot she knew” (61):

Nan was the one she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half of another. And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall



nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (62)

The story Nan tells her is that of Sethe's mother's killing those children fathered by whites. The story is remembered when *Beloved* returns and asks about Sethe's mother. It is a story that has a progressive effect on Sethe, exactly as the story of Sethe's murder of *Beloved* has on Denver: "As small girl Sethe, she was unimpressed. As grown-up woman Sethe she was angry, but not certain at what." Now, in remembering her own relationship to her two daughters, she is able to understand her mother's acts and her grandmother's code. By situating herself within a communal narrative of grandmother-mother-daughter relationships, Sethe is able to understand herself. The code becomes unlocked and available for her hearing.

I have suggested that part of the significance of Denver's "hearing" her mother explain to *Beloved* the reasons for her action is that she becomes the "aural being" of this speakerly text. Moreover, the act of hearing symbolizes Denver's overcoming her deafness—wrought, as it was, of her first hearing of her mother's act. For Sethe, telling her story allowed her to understand *her* mother's history. For Denver, telling her mother's story allows her to understand the communal history and her place in it. As we saw, Sethe's final healing occurs in imitation of Denver—as Denver places her story next to Nelson Lord's, Sethe places hers next to Paul D's. Denver is, then, in a very real sense, completing her mother's story. That, finally, is what an aural being is to the speakerly text's unfolding—both the space for the reader's participation and, as Brooks suggests, a symbol of the illusion of completeness, of closure.

It is worth noting the differences between aural beings and their roles in the novels we can designate as speakerly texts. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* gives us a framed story, with the hearer—Pheoby—being presented at the beginning and end of the relation. She is the gauge of our understanding of Janie's tale and the source of Janie's justification in the eyes of the community: "Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin."<sup>41</sup> In Hurston's novel, then, the scene of the grandmother's relating her

story to her granddaughter is part of the overall enactment of the telling of the tale. Much as Nanny attempted to justify her life in an oral story to her granddaughter, so does Janie—that very granddaughter—attempt to justify her life by telling it to her friend. In *Dessa Rose*, we find out only in the epilogue that the aural beings are Dessa's grandchildren. By exposing the fact that this is an enactment of the grandmother's oral narration at the very end, Williams forces us to reconsider our relation to textual history. "Afro-Americans," she writes in her prefatory note, "having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing" (ix). In a bold gesture, Williams makes Dessa's orality the foundation of any textual record of her. The white Nehemiah's records become illegible and blank sheets; Dessa's story is recorded by her son and *said* back to her. The oral transmission, then, is the enactment of part of this novel's polemical trajectory: the establishing of the primacy of a told tale.

*Beloved* differs from these two means of organizing orality within the speakerly text in that it is based on a variety of discrete oral linguistic communities; and its story is about the establishment of a communal narrative. The critique of the newspaper's report and the condemnation of schoolteacher's racist anthropology attest to the ex-slaves' refusal to be written. They are, nonetheless, discrete individuals prevented by various deafnesses from *hearing* the communal story to which they belong. Paul D must learn to understand the community of mother and daughters, just as he must learn to hear Sethe's story of her infanticide (he had felt her *voice* was too close, we recall). Denver must understand Sethe's story, as well, because she is the one who must go out and tell it—tell it in order to save her mother. Likewise, Sethe learns to understand how to claim herself as her own best thing only after she is able to understand what her grandmother told her, only after she is able to understand her mother's actions as part of a larger framework of experience.

The scenes of hearing the mother's tongue, understanding the mother's code, knowing the mother's history—these are themselves the very enactment of an ongoing generational oral transmission. In themselves, they represent the organization of this novel's speakerliness. Unlike *Dessa Rose* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, each of which enacts a single scene of oral transmission of one person's story to her grandchildren or to her friend, *Beloved* is concerned with demonstrating the variety and continuousness of oral transmissions necessary for any person to understand her own story. In this, each of the major characters in the novel

signifies on the story of each of her or his fellow characters in order to establish a communal narrative—*Beloved* itself. The best figure for this (internal) formal revision is Paul D's desire to place his story next to Sethe's. The novel is, finally, about putting stories together and putting them to rest.

Putting to rest, of course, for Morrison means giving renewed and energetic life. From this rest, she gives her characters resurrection. In the end, perhaps the greatest achievement of Morrison's novel is that she gives the murdered victim of history *voice*; she resurrects the unjustly killed and allows that daughter to have renewed historical life by criticizing the sort of history that has hitherto excluded her and her rebellious spirit. In the end, this impetus is best expressed in one of W. E. B. Du Bois's most lyrical moments, in a passage that can almost act as a commentary on the novel which would be published nearly eighty-five years later: "It is a hard thing to live haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream; to see the wide vision of empire fade into real ashes and dirt; to feel the pang of the conquered, and yet to know that with all the Bad that fell on one black day, something was vanquished that deserved to live, something killed that in justice had not dared to die."<sup>42</sup> In giving that "ghost" a renewed voice and life, Morrison not only criticizes the institution responsible for *Beloved's* death but also shows the healing knowledge that accrues to those attentive to the ghost's presence. What Morrison does in *Beloved* is to remember in order to revive, to survive, to rename, to re-possess. At the end of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker, signing herself as author and medium, writes, "I thank everybody in this book for coming." In the preface to *Dessa Rose*, Williams claims to have the feeling of "owning" a summer in the nineteenth century. Resuscitating historical figures may indeed give one the feeling of belonging to a larger community, of being at one with the ancestors—in Walker's metaphor, of being in the temple of the familiar; in Morrison's metaphor, of burying the dead to revive them. Nothing serves more persuasively to delineate how an author feels when she has revised and revived history than Morrison's own commentary on her novel. At the end of her conversation with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison reflects on what her creative act continues to mean to her:

It was a conversation. I can tell, because I said something I didn't know I knew. About the "dead girl." That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in

the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called—walks freely around the house, sits down in a chair; looks at me. . . . She is here now, alive. I have seen, named and claimed her—and oh what company she keeps.

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## Notes

- 1 John Edgar Wideman, *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983; rpt., New York: Random House, 1988), prefatory half-page; Wideman, *Interviews With Black Writers*, ed. John O'Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973), 220–21.
- 2 Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 339–45, esp. 344; Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea* 59 (December 1984): 385–90, esp. 385, 389. Cf. Morrison, "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction," in *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, ed. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watt (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1980), 35–43.
- 3 Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 1–34, esp. 11; cf. 25, where she describes how in the writing of *Tar Baby* she had to deal with "the nostalgia, the history, the nostalgia for the history; the violence done to it and the consequences of that violence." See Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston: The Colored Cooperative Publishing Co., 1900), 13–14.
- 4 Deborah E. McDowell, "Boundaries: Our Distant Relations and Close Kin," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 51–70, esp. 70; Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Introduction," *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gates (New York: Meridian, 1990), 1–17, esp. 16.
- 5 Hortense J. Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 25–61, esp. 52. See also Ralph Ellison, "A Very Stern Discipline," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 275–307, esp. 276, 287–88. The term, theory, and typographical notation of "signifyin(g)" are all derived from the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr., from his two formative essays, "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition" and "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," both in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New

- York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 3–58, 235–76, and especially from his consummate book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).
- 6 Bonnie Angelo, “The Pain of Being Black” [An Interview with Toni Morrison], *Time* (22 May 1989): 68–70, esp. 68. Morrison also expressed the difficulty of her chosen subject matter in *Beloved* to Sandi Russell in March 1986; see Russell, “‘It’s OK to Say OK,’” *Women’s Review* [London] 5 (March 1986): 22–24; reprinted in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), 43–54, esp. 45: “It was an era I didn’t want to get into—going back into and through grief.”
  - 7 Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, “A Conversation,” *Southern Review* 21 (1985): 567–93, esp. 584–85. Hereafter I will cite all quotations from this article parenthetically in the body of the essay.
  - 8 Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (Cincinnati: Western Tract Society, 1876), 557–67, esp. 559–60. Portions of Coffin’s narrative have been reprinted in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Random House, 1971), 60–63; and Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Berkley, 1987), 195–200.
  - 9 The story of Margaret Garner’s escape will seem familiar to some readers as a historical event replicating (four years after) the literary event of Eliza’s escape in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, chaps. 7 and 8. Eliza, too, crosses the semi-frozen Ohio River from Kentucky to escape Shelby. For the sources for the Eliza episode, see Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853; rpt., Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968), 21–23.
  - 10 Toni Morrison, Foreword, Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (New York: Morgan & Morgan, 1978). The photographs are by James Van Der Zee, the poetry by Owen Dodson, and the text by Camille Billops.
  - 11 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 149.
  - 12 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 274. Subsequent quotations from *Beloved* will be taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the body of the essay.
  - 13 The story was reported in *The Liberator* 26 (21 March 1856): 47, reprinted from the Cincinnati *Commercial*; see Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 62–63. It was also reported in the Philadelphia *Press* (14 March 1870), reprinted from the Cincinnati *Chronicle*; see Blockson, *The Underground Railroad*, 199–200. For the *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1856), 44–47, see Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 vols., ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1950–1975), 2:568 n. 30.
  - 14 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 53, 67.
  - 15 While hearing Trueblood relate this story to him and the white Mr. Norton, the “invisible man” thinks to himself, “How can he tell this to white men . . . when he knows they’ll say that all Negroes do such things?” (57).
  - 16 For Levi Coffin, John Jolliffe, and Lucy Stone, see Coffin, *Reminiscences*,

- 557, 548, 561–62, 564–65. Frederick Douglass, “WEST INDIA EMANCIPATION, speech delivered at Canandaigua, New York, 4 August 1857,” *The Life and Writings*, 2:426–39, esp. 437.
- 17 Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892; rpt., Boston: Beacon, 1987), 65, 98.
  - 18 Herbert Aptheker, “The Negro Woman,” *Masses and Mainstream* 11 (February 1948): 10–17, esp. 11–12; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 21, 29, 205.
  - 19 Naylor and Morrison, “A Conversation,” 584: “I’m not even sure what the denouement is of her story.” Cf. Barbara Christian, “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something’: African-American Women’s Historical Novels,” in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), 326–41, esp. 336. Christian is quoting Morrison’s “Distinguished University of California Regents’ Lecture,” University of California, Berkeley, 13 October 1987.
  - 20 See note 13 above; cf. Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 567.
  - 21 Stanley Crouch, “Aunt Medea,” *New Republic* (19 October 1987): 38–43, esp. 42.
  - 22 See, for instance, Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd rev. ed. (1959; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), esp. 223–310; and those who have responded to his arguments, especially John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2nd rev. ed. (1972; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979); George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, Conn.: Westport Publishing Co., 1972); Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William H. Freehling (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), esp. 188–200; Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blasingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Random House, 1976); and Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).
  - 23 For the debate concerning Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 5th rev. ed. (1943; New York: International Publishers, 1987), see Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 53–75.
  - 24 Robert B. Stepto, “‘Intimate Things in Place’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979), 213–29, esp. 225.
  - 25 Russell, “It’s OK to say OK,” *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, 43–47, esp. 46, 44.

- 26 Claudia Tate, "Toni Morrison [An Interview]," in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1984), 118–31, esp. 130–31; Berry and Blassingame, *Long Memory*, x; Morrison, Foreword, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.
- 27 William Wells Brown, *Clotelle: or, The Colored Heroine. A Tale of the Southern States* (Boston: Lee & Shepherd, 1867), 50–52. In the first edition of this novel, entitled *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter. A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), Clotel herself jumps into the Potomac. This novel, too, it is worth mentioning, uses a historical daughter as its protagonist, Clotelle being (as legend has it) the mulatto daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave housekeeper Sally Hemings. For a discussion of the Jefferson legend in relation to Brown's novels, see Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 39–40, 354 nn. 1, 4. For a more recent treatment of the Jefferson connection, see Barbara Chase-Riboud's wonderful novel, *Sally Hemings* (1979; rpt., New York: Avon, 1980).
- 28 Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939; rpt., Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984), 16.
- 29 Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 80, 86; cf. 16, 31, 35, 47, 55–56, 61–62, 109, 141, 166, 173.
- 30 As I pointed out earlier, in one account, Margaret Garner's second daughter is drowned; in others, we know nothing of her future.
- 31 I have discussed the ways that collective anamnesis informs three of Morrison's novels in another paper, "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," *Contemporary Literature* 31 (Fall 1990): 300–23.
- 32 Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 170–216, esp. 181; cf. 22. Gates suggests an analogy between the "speakerly text" and the Russian Formalist idea of *skaz*; see Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 238; cited in Gates, 276 n. 19; cf. 112.
- 33 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 260; cf. 236.
- 34 Morrison, "Rootedness," 341. Cf. Naylor and Morrison, "A Conversation," 582; and Tate, "Toni Morrison [An Interview]," 125.
- 35 Morrison, "Rootedness," 341. For her comparison of the black novel to music, see Russell, "'It's OK to say OK,'" 46; and Robert B. Stepto, "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 228.
- 36 Thomas LeClair, "'The Language Must Not Sweat': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *New Republic* (21 March 1981): 25–29, esp. 26.
- 37 Morrison, "Rootedness," 340.
- 38 Langston Hughes, "Aunt Sue's Stories," *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1959), 6.
- 39 Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986; New York: Berkley, 1987), 10,

- 250, 260. Much of my reading of *Dessa Rose* is indebted to two recent studies: Gwendolyn Mae Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989), 16–37, esp. 25–26, 32; and Deborah E. McDowell, "Negotiating Between Tenses," *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, 144–63, esp. 150, 156–57.
- 40 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr., rev. ed. (1845; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 57. On other slave songs that specifically were meant to exclude the slaveholding community from understanding their intent, see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 11, 51.
- 41 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; rpt., Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), 284.
- 42 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 357–547, esp. 415.