硕士学位论文

填补历史的空白

——论托尼·莫里森《宠儿》中的历史重构

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内 容 摘 要

最近几十年来，历史小说，尤其是有关奴隶制度的历史小说呈现出全面复兴的景象。作家们纷纷开始重新审视美国过去的奴隶制，对其发生浓厚的兴趣。而且这一复兴也吸引了大批读者。他们的作品被称为“新奴隶叙事小说”（伯纳德·W·贝尔语）。新奴隶叙事小说产生于 60 年代，出自一批才华横溢的文化精英之手。当时所谓的法律上的平等显然使大多数的美国黑人的社会经济权利受到剥夺，因此，黑人权利运动将民权运动取而代之，黑人权利运动同时也鼓舞了新左派奴隶制历史学家，促使他们对曾在 30 年代盛行一时的奴隶考证与奴隶反抗再度重视起来。

《宠儿》（1873）作为新奴隶叙事小说，既是这一历史语境的产物，同时也对其产生积极作用。《宠儿》的作者托尼·莫里森，是当代著名的美国黑人女作家，于 1993 年获得诺贝尔文学奖，她对美国黑人的生活与历史极为关注。尽管这些年来许多评论家一直赞扬她在作品中使人物“超越黑人性”，赋予人物一种人人能够理解的普遍性。可莫里森其实是反其道而行之，她旨在进行一种无可辩驳的黑人写作，对于其小说中的人物—受到极度压迫的美国黑人男女，她强调的是他们特殊的种族身份，因为她深知文学正处于从文明记忆中消逝的危险之中。莫里森致力于使逝去的获得再生，以对美国黑人前辈们表达敬意以及激励当代美国黑人重看自己民族的历史，这使《宠儿》对于美国黑人来说显得尤其重要。

《宠儿》的背景是 1873 年的美国重建时期。小说着重表现了记忆和历史的力

量。对于小说中的那些已获自由的黑奴来说，过去是一种负重，一种他们竭尽全力，一心一意想要忘记的东西。然而小说的女主人公塞丝却怎么也逃不出奴隶生活的记忆，那记忆似阴影一般笼罩在她的心头。这些记忆附着在她死去的女儿的魂灵上，一直纠缠着她。18 年前，塞丝为了让这个女儿摆脱奴隶生活的厄运而杀死了她。莫里森的这个故事取自发生在玛格丽特·加纳身上的一个真实事件：她和塞丝一样，在肯塔基州将要逮住她时，她杀死了自己的孩子。《宠儿》就游离于虚幻的小说和真实的历史之间。通过对一个黑人家庭悲欢离合的记录，莫里森深刻论述了蓄奴制的历史遗毒及其对人心理上的影响。

莫里森不追求形式上的难度，不掩饰自己的政治倾向，不否认世上有是非曲直，不否认所有的宏大叙事。她认为自我与历史是可以被构建的。但她并不因此而忽视它们，而是要在批判传统丑化他者否认历史的同时重建自我与历史。莫里森文学创作的一个主要目的就是重构黑人历史。她指出，美国人，无论是黑人还是白人，都不愿回忆黑人的过去。她写《宠儿》纪念在蓄奴制下惨死的六千万黑人，就是要重构黑人的真实历史，医治这种全国性的健忘症。这段历史曾因黑奴受到压迫，处于“失语”状态和他们自己刻意忘却身为奴隶的惨痛经历而失落。一个原本在历史上被剥夺了语言力量的民族，却在莫里森书写的这段历史中找到了自己的声音。《宠儿》一书也具有一定的说教意味。从塞丝的经历，我们可以悟出这样一个道理：我们必须去正视，去理解往昔岁月中“那不散的阴魂”，才能够开创出未来的安定生活。莫里森暗示，当代的美国读者必须像塞丝一样，直面那段蓄奴制的历史，才能更好地解决蓄奴制的遗留问题，进而解决这些遗留问题所表现出来的年深日久的种族歧视与纷争。

莫里森曾经说过，她想帮助建立一种黑人作品的标准。因为她注意到一些黑人作家过于迎合白人读者的口味。她觉得这些作家应当把精力放在写作本身。许多读者认为，莫里森的小说已经朝着她自己的文学理想迈出了很大的一步。她写《宠儿》时所运用的那种富有诗意而优雅的风格，并没有迎合任何人。莫里森需要并激励她的读者去接受她的写作方式。

本文共分七章：

第一章引论部分通过对《宠儿》相关评论的综述，指出其主题，结构，语言等方面的特点，提出本文的研究目的。

第二章重点介绍了《宠儿》这部小说的社会历史背景。莫里森的写作具有我们当今时代处境的清醒意识。尽管她将小说的时间置于 1873 年，但与此同时莫里森

却也在关注二十世纪九十年代的时代处境。莫里森之所以致力于历史记忆的描写在于她对今天的美国黑人和后现代文化氛围中的其他人对过去的无视甚至是蔑视的情况的关切。她说写作《宠儿》的灵感来自她从不同的几个地方听到的故事的两三个小片段。一个故事是有关玛格里特·加纳的，另一个是讲照片上的一个将死的姑娘。

第三章讨论了《宠儿》中莫里森复杂的历史观。她一方面表现出后现代主义者对官方历史叙事的怀疑，另一方面又深信美国黑人深层文化记忆的重要性，为了建设一个美好的明天，美国黑人必须牢记过去，而后一点则是现代主义者的政治抱负。莫里森在这两个主义中找到了平衡，颠覆了美国黑人社会抗议所依托的哲学基础—现代主义—和对元叙事以及历史和历时的时间观表示质疑的后现代主义之间的绝对对立。

第四章“重写奴隶叙事”通过对比的方法，具体分析了传统奴隶叙事的不足之处和在《宠儿》中莫里森是怎样重看或重读黑人不堪的过去，如何重写奴隶叙事，以填补传统奴隶叙事留下的历史空白。从形式上和主题上，《宠儿》与传统奴隶叙事相符，但同时又颠覆了传统奴隶叙事。莫里森将她对美国黑人过去的所知与她的非凡的想象力相结合后对历史进行了再思索。这一思索建立在这样的事实上，即历史的表述是一种人为构建。莫里森在对传统叙事题材的重写中将事实与以虚构见长的小说完美地结合在了一起。

第五章具体分析了小说中话语权的缺失，主人公对话语权的寻找与争取，聆听对象的确立及更深一步对谁是叙事权威进行了讨论。得到话语权，发出声音，讲出自己的故事是曾经被边缘化了的群体进入历史的标志。得到话语权最终与建构新的身份成为定义者而非被定义者紧密联系在一起。《宠儿》中，主人公们努力讲出自己的故事，将“不堪叙说”的东西讲出来，从物的客体转变为人的主体，被压抑的声音试图释放出来。自我的转变及随之而来的对历史叙事权威的探求是对霸权和绝对权利结构的挑战。

第六章，“历史康复”，论证了《宠儿》中历史的构建不但对于书中的人物是一个心灵得到治愈的过程，对于书的读者和作者也是如此。《宠儿》中，莫里森建构了一个个人心理康复的过程和历史或说是民族心理康复的过程的平行结构。书中塞丝学会面对自己的过去，心灵得到了痊愈。而读者必须学习塞丝去面对塞丝的过去，即自己过去的一部分，民族的过去。

第七章总结全文。

M. A. Thesis

Filling in the Blanks:

Historical Reconstruction in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Major: English Language and Literature

Specialty: British and American Literature

Supervisor: Professor Sun Tai

Author: Liu Xia

Abstract

The past few decades have seen a resurgence of the historical novels in general, and of the historical novels of slavery in particular. Writers have taken a new interest in revisiting America's slavery past and have appealed to a wide audience in the process. And their works are referred to as "neo-slave narratives" (a term invented by Bernard W. Bell). The neo-slave narratives emerged from a constellation of cultural and political forces during the sixties. The Black Power movement took over from the Civil Rights movement when it became clear that legal equality still left most African Americans socially and economically disenfranchised. In turn the movement fired up New Left historians of slavery, who renewed the interest in slave testimony and slave resistance that had briefly flourished in the thirties.

Beloved (1987), as a neo-slave narrative, is the product of and a contribution to this historical context. Its author, Toni Morrison, a contemporary African American woman writer, who won the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature, concerns mainly about the life and history of African Americans. Though many critics have over the years praised her for transcending the blackness of her characters and bestowing on them an abstract universality that everyone can understand, Morrison does just the reverse. She aims to

create indisputably black writing, and insists upon the particular racial identities of her fictional people—black women and men under stresses peculiar to them and their station in America—because she knows a truth about literature that seems in danger of passing from civilized memory. Morrison's commitment to resurfacing the dead and paying tribute to black Americans of previous generations has made *Beloved* particularly poignant to African American readers.

Set during the Reconstruction era in 1873, *Beloved* centers on the power of memory and history. For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of slavery are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered this daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history; from the experiences of a single family, Morrison creates a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery.

Part of Morrison's project in *Beloved* is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of forced silences and willed forgetfulness. Morrison writes Sethe's story with the voices of a people who historically have been denied the power of language. *Beloved* also contains a didactic element. From Sethe's experience, we learn that before a stable future can be created, we must confront the history of slavery in order to address its legacy, which manifests itself in ongoing racial discrimination and discord.

Morrison once said that she wanted to help create a canon of black work, noting that black writers too often have to pander to a white audience when they should be able to concentrate on the business of writing instead. Many readers believe Morrison's novels go a long way toward the establishment of her envisioned tradition. The poetic, elegant style of her writing in *Beloved* panders to no one. Morrison challenges and requires the reader to accept her on her own terms.

This thesis consists of seven chapters:

Chapter One serves as introduction in which the features of *Beloved* are analyzed from the aspects of theme, structure and language through a literature review of relevant

criticism. Based on these, the aim of this thesis is stated.

Chapter Two gives us the social background of the novel. Morrison's writing is informed by an acute awareness of the conditions of our own era. Although the setting of her novel *Beloved* is in the 1870s, Toni Morrison is at the same time dealing with contemporary circumstances in the 1990s. Morrison's commitment to historical remembering arises from her concern about the ignorance of and even contempt for the past that she sees in both contemporary African American and postmodern culture. 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". The first was the story of Margaret Garner and the second was a dying girl in a picture.

Chapter Three, "Morrison's Hybrid View of History in *Beloved*", shows that *Beloved* conveys Toni Morrison's hybrid vision of history. It exhibits a postmodern skepticism of official historical narratives. And it also retains African American political commitment (based on a modernist ideology) to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future. It balances on the verges between two worldviews, subverting the dichotomy between African American social protest and a postmodernist questioning of metanarratives about history and time.

Chapter Four, "Rewriting the Slave Narrative", highlights Morrison's great work of rewriting the traditional slave narrative. In other words, it is a "contesting revision or rereading of the past". The novel installs and then subverts the genre of the slave narrative effecting formal and thematic renewal from within. Morrison combines her knowledge of the African American past with the power of her imagination in a rethinking of history which foregrounds the fact that historical representation is a human construct. Morrison elegantly mixes fact and fiction in her revised version of the traditional genre.

Chapter Five, "Voice and Narrative Authority", relates that finding voice and telling personal histories marked the inscription into history of the formerly marginalized. Finding voice is intimately connected with constructing new identities, being the definer rather than the defined. In *Beloved,* the oppressed gain voice and in the process are transformed from objects to subjects by telling their stories and voicing the "unspeakable things unspoken". This transformation of the self and the subsequent pursuit of historical narrative authority challenge hierarchies and absolute power structures. *Beloved* resists

notions of a centralized authority while not denying that forms of authority – both central and marginal – yet exist in the world

Chapter Six, "Historical Recovery", shows that in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, history making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author. In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process. Sethe's process of healing in *Beloved*, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live. In *Beloved*, Morrison negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. Morrison uses ritual as a model for the healing process. Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world.

Chapter Seven draws a conclusion of the whole thesis. It is concluded that *Beloved* is a critical revision of the past in which Morrison gives creative expression to aspects of experience ignored or downplayed in traditional white historiography. Consequently, the novel addresses the postmodern issue of the provisional nature of historical knowledge and the importance of historical reconstruction.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Your country? How came it yours? Before the pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the spirit ... Would America have been America without her Negro people?

— Du Bois

If my work is to be functional to the group (to the village, as it were) then it must bear witness and identity that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out....

—Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation and Writing"

Toni Morrison (1931-), the famous contemporary American writer, has gained world-wide reputation as one of the best novelists in the history of American literature. As a black writer, Morrison mainly focuses her attention on the life of the Black and writes a series of novels. Her works include *The Bluest Eye* (1967), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998).

In these works, Morrison insists on describing the life of the ordinary black people from her peculiar point of view. These works win great success and the Nobel Prize to her "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality".[1]

Among all these novels, *Beloved* is her fifth and the most famous one. In this novel, Toni Morrison seems to have integrated into her works all major "-isms". Besides as a feminist, she can also be labeled as a naturalist, an existentialist, a realist, a romanticist, a modernist and a postmodernist. Since its publication, *Beloved* has attracted many readers and critics.

Chicago Sun-Time once valued *Beloved* as "Toni Morrison's finest work … Nothing she has written so sets her apart, so displays her prodigious, almost shocking talent." The New York Times Book Review warmly acclaimed the novel as "A Triumph".

In the present literary world, *Beloved* has become a modern classic, and has been studied by many critics from various respects. For instance, Ashraf H. A. Ruhdy has studied it from Sigmund Freud's point of view and analyzed the novel totally from the perspective of psychology of the characters in *Beloved.* In a critical work, *Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Issues and Themes*, edited by Philip Thody, it has been discussed as an experimental, magic, realistic, and postmodern novel. In Deborah Guth's eyes, however, *Beloved* is just a dialogue with Christianity.

Published in 1987 as Morrison was enjoying increasing popularity and success, *Beloved* became a best seller and received the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Its reception by critics was overwhelming, and the book is widely considered Morrison's greatest novel to date.

Mythic in scope, *Beloved* is an attempt to grapple with the legacy of slavery. Morrison based her novel on a real-life incident: an escaped slave woman, who faced recapture, killed her children rather than allow them to be taken back into slavery. In the novel, the protagonist's near-recapture follows the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, part of the Compromise of 1850, which stated that escaped slaves, as property, could be tracked down across stated lines and retrieved by their old masters.

In *Beloved,* Morrison explores themes of love, family, and self-possession in a world where slavery has only recently become a thing of the past. Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's murdered child, returning for unclear reasons. She appears as a full-grown woman at the age that the baby would have been had it lived. Part history, part ghost story and part historical fiction, the novel also seeks to understand the impact of slavery, both on the psychology of individuals and on the larger patterns of culture and history. Morrison was drawn to the historical account, which brought up questions of what it meant to love and to be a mother in a place and time where life was often devalued. The novel powerfully portrays the meanings of what it means to be owned by another and the difficulty of owning oneself.

Beloved also presents a powerful account of the foundation of black America. The memories of the characters extend back no farther than the beginning of American

slavery. The institution of slavery destroyed much of the heritage of the Africans brought to the Americas; the novel partially recounts the creation of a new people and culture, a people displaced and forced to forge a new identity in the face of brutality and dehumanization. Fragmentary in structure and written with great psychological intimacy, the book also continues with Morrison's narrative experiments that began with *The Bluest Eye* and have continued throughout her career. In 1998 it was adapted for a film starring Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey. The film met mixed critical response and was a box of office failure, a testament, at least, to the uniquely literary qualities of the novel.

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.[2] 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.[3] It is within this revisionary fray that *Beloved* may profitably be examined. As it will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the novel remembers the victimization of the ex-slaves who are its protagonists and also asserts the healing and wholeness that those protagonists carry with them in their communal lives. 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."[4]

Morrison writes out of a dual perspective in order to re-possess by remembering the

ancestor, not only an aesthetic act but an act of historical recovery: "roots are less a *matter of shared history; less to do with place, than with inner space.*"[5]

Each act of writing a novel is for her an act of discovering deep within herself some relationship to a "collective memory". Memory itself 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.'"[6]

In the novel, Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs expresses this truth. Baby Suggs knows that "death was anything but forgetfulness". (4) That remembering is both a resurrection and a pain, which 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.*

Five aspects are central to an understanding of the novel: historical background of the novel, including contemporary contempt of history and the real incident of Margaret Garner which inspired in the story; Morrison's hybrid view of history in the novel; the rewriting of the traditional slave narrative; the attainment of voice and narrative authority; and historical recovery, both individual and collective. All five aspects relate to the postmodernism and they combine to produce the historical awareness and cultural consciousness, which enables Morrison in *Beloved* to transform private experience into public consciousness.

Chapter Two

History in *Beloved*

In order to understand the present, you got to commune with the past.

—John Berendt

Us free like them; was slave like them. What for is this difference?

—Toni Morrison, Paradise

Nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection.

—Toni Morrison

Linda Hutcheon sees postmodernism so obsessed with history that she defines the genre as "historiographic metafiction",[7] and clearly Toni Morrison has both implicitly and explicitly indicated that she is intent on the rewriting of black history, the "remapping of the historical terrain for African Americans, a terrain that had been previously charted by a master narrative from the outside, rather than from the inside of their experiences, a history that even African American communities might have begun to forget, or might not want to remember."[8] But reading Morrison's work with only an eye to a different interpretation of her people's history does not truly gauge the meaning of her work, for she is not only engaged in the recuperation or even just the re-centering of facts from an African perspective. "The crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because fact can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot."[9]

Morrison's writing is informed by an acute awareness of the conditions of our own era. Although the setting of her novel *Beloved* is in the 1870s, Toni Morrison is at the same time dealing with contemporary circumstances in the 1990s.

A. Importance of Historical Consciousness

Morrison's commitment to historical remembering arises from her concern about the ignorance of and even contempt for the past that she sees in both contemporary African

American and postmodern culture. In an interview in 1988, she remarked: "the past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past."[10] While working on *The Black Book* in the early 1970s, Morrison expressed disdain for the Black Power movement's creation of new myths and their retreat to ancient African myths of the "far and misty past".[11] More relevant to the process of liberation, she felt, was knowledge of the 300-year history of African Americans. In an interview, when the interviewer asked her why she talked a lot in her works about grandparents and ancestors and why it was so important to deep them in mind, Morrison said:

> It's DNA, it's where you get your information, your cultural information. Also it's your protection, it's your education. They were so responsible for us, and we have to be responsible to them. Knowing as a child how to care for my grandfather, being told what to do for him, gave me a lot of information about growing old, respecting people. It's payback — for all those times he played the violin for us and drew pictures for us. I remember reading the Bible to my grandmother when she was dying; she used to take our hands and dance us around the kitchen table. You can't just take. Our ancestors are part of that circle, an ever-widening circle, one hopes. And if you ignore that, you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous position of being self-sufficient, having no group that you're dependent on.[12]

In the 1988 interview, Morrison applauded the emergence of a new body of historical fiction by black writers, and she found it ironic "that black writers are descending deeper into historical concerns at the same moment white literati are abolishing it in the name of something they call 'postmodernism'... History has become impossible for them".[13] Morrison seems here to accept Fredric Jameson's negative portrayal of postmodernism—a definition contested by Hutcheon and others—as historical "depthlessness" and "a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality".[14] Back in 1974, Morrison also expressed concerns that would be echoed by Jameson, a concern that real history was being replaced by historicism—the textualizing of time as a mere representation, as a simulacrum (to use Jean Baudrillard's formulation). Sounding rather Marxist, Morrison bemoaned the "shallow" myths of the black liberation movement's Afrocentrism, "because our children can't use and don't need and will certainly reject history-as-imagined. They deserve better: history as life lived," which was what Morrison

was attempting to record in *The Black Book.*[15]

What concerns Morrison is the survival of her people. She has been sensitive enough to notice a great decline of the black culture in the 20th century, which has been fostering to the African Americans for centuries, both throughout slavery and the so-called Reconstruction, and in the course of industrialization. One of the consequences of this decline is a crisis in the soul of her people. Morrison has held a clear-cut attitude toward the "old-tribe" values maintained and embodied in the Afro-American culture:

> This civilization of black people, which was underneath white civilization, was there with its everything. Everything of that civilization was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled.[16]

To Morrison, the significance of the black culture should never be neglected; it should be passed on through generations. However, two illustrations of reality are spelling a different story. On the one hand, more and more blacks are leaving the rural area they grew up in, leaving behind them not only the tribe or the community, but also the old values preserved in the black culture. The younger generations are seem to be "devoured" by the encroaching white civilization; they have mostly no idea of their origin and some even discard the African American customs and tradition as the "oldtimeniggerstuff".[17]

Having investigated the origin of this problem consciously and conscientiously for a long time, Morrison had her findings implied when she argued that:

> After the many years of suffering and endurance, blacks can grasp life and make it their own. But they must be aware of who they are and where they come from.[18]

Morrison indicates that it is dangerous for the black to forget their origin, their cultural identity. To find out about his/her origin and identity, one has to go back to history, but one more knotty problem arises, as:

> We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is silent for it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the worth of the past. That memory is much in danger now that it was 30 years ago.[19]

Morrison, as well as many other black novelists, has realized that the history that has

been recorded and taught in books is largely biased and misleading. Just as is pointed out by Suzanne Scafe: "the schools transmit the notion, ... pass off as truth, that culture is white, male, and middle class. This not only shapes Black students' expectations of the school, its purpose and function, but leads them to expect not to see aspects of their own culture and environment there."[20] As a result of this ideological misleading, more and more blacks of the younger generations are becoming alien to their own culture and the soil fostering that culture, the black community. It is an urgent task to guide them back to the harbor before they lose themselves in the dangerous darkness.

Prior to Morrison, a number of black activists (a long list including preachers, reformers, scholars, teachers and writers) have already approached the task of maintaining and developing the black culture. Taking serious the significance of cultural consciousness, they have striven to record and glorify the blacks' past, and have for long engaged themselves in enlightening their people. Their job, though largely drowned throughout the long history of struggling, is highly appraised by Morrison:

> These are the people whose work is real and pointed and clear in its application to the race.
> ...
> They know who they are and so do we. They clarify our past, make livable our present and are certain to shape our future. And since the future is where our immortality as a race lies, no overview of the state of black people at this time can ignore some speculation on the only ones certain to live it – the children.[21]

With a high sense of responsibility to their people, these pioneers have consciously resurrected and glorified a culture of the black, by the black and for the black. Having benefited a great deal from this very culture, which has been salvaged in the light of these forerunners, Morrison would not hesitate to challenge herself with the same mission of edifying her people, especially the younger generations—the future of her people. Thus the era has prescribed the black writers to rescue their culture through restoring a history of truth, a history that has been created and participated in not only by the whites but also by the blacks. Defining her own role as a writer, Morrison says: "[My task is] to hear a history that is unrecorded, untaught, in the mainstream education, and to enlighten our people."[22] This assertion finds instant echoes upon the harps of many other black writers; one remarkable instance is Alice Walker, another prominent black woman laureate, who

states that "I think my whole program as a writer is to deal with history just so I know where I am".[23] Both writers express the wish to explore the past and to "rediscover and redefine" history, which is, in fact, not a task confined to the Afro-American writers; to a large extent, it belongs also to those African lettermen who are facing the same problem of how to restore the cultural identity to their people.

In his essay, "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe says:

> The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost ... you need a writer to bring out the human tragedy, the crisis in the soul.[24]

What Achebe defines as the role of an African writer is generally applicable to the black American writers and to Morrison specifically. Ever since her first novel, Toni Morrison has borne in her mind the task of enlightening her people through writing, which is to her a systematic way of thinking to link to the past and the present, a way of learning from history what is good for her people. In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Morrison remarks, "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write, isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it isn't about anything."[25] By this statement, she has it clarified that the black community is not only the subject but also the audience of her writing.

B. Scenes of Inspiration

Morrison thought that the novel *Beloved* 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".[26]

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 "property, 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".[27] The first was the story of Margaret Garner and the second was a dying girl in a picture.

1. Margaret Garner Case

Toni Morrison is both an African American writer and a postmodernist. This is obvious in *Beloved* where Morrison mixes fact and fiction and derived her story from a real historical incident. Morrison came across the story of a fugitive slave who killed her baby in order to save it from slavery when she was editing *The Black Book*. The original Sethe was a slave woman called 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."[28] 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*.

The fact that abolitionists wanted to have Margaret Garner tried for murder rather than just "stealing property" is central to Morrison's novel because it reveals the gap

between the way in which the slaves were considered by their white masters (inhuman property) and the way in which they perceived of themselves. By naming the benevolent slave master (from whom the slaves received their last names) Garner, Morrison refers directly back to the original Margaret Garner and her crime.

The infanticide is the traumatic event around which the novel *Beloved* circles, the unspeakable heart of the story, and Morrison uses her imagination to reconstruct historical context in order to tell the tale of an unspeakable past taking possession of the present. In *Beloved* the private experience of the characters is transformed into public consciousness; we are told at the end that "this is not a story to pass on". Nevertheless, Morrison passes it on.

Quite literally the story of Sethe, Paul D and Beloved is absorbed by the public consciousness of a large audience. Linda Hutcheon describes this elevation of private experience to public consciousness as typical of postmodern historiographic metafiction because it "renders inextricable the public and historical and the private and biographical". It shows historical facts to be rooted in the lives of common people and provides an alternative to official historical representation with its gaps and blind spots.

The seeds of the novel were planted back in the 1970s when Toni Morrison undertook the editing of *The Black Book*, a collection of "original raw material documenting our black life"; in the process she discovered many painful incidents of black history, including the infamous story of Margaret Garner. She cites an article, titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child", published in the *American Baptist* in 1856:

> She [Margaret Garner] said that when the officers and slave-holders came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and she took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other – that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all – that with regard to herself, she cared but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.
> I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piecemeal.[29]

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".[30] The story of Margaret Garner stayed

with Morrison, representing, even though unclearly, something about feminine selflessness. It took another story to clarify more precisely what Margaret Garner and her story meant.

2. Dying Girl in a Picture

Morrison found the second 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.[31]

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 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."[32] 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."[33] 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 there safe.
> I'm safe in here, Tootsie.[34]

Van Der Zee's photographs give renewed life to the dead. Dodson's poem gives renewed voice to the dead girl. 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. In *Sula,* when the heroine Sula dies, she feels her face smiling: "'Well, I'll be damned,' she thought, 'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nell.'"[35]

In 1987, with *Beloved*, Morrison goes further in giving the dead voice, in remembering the forgotten. *Beloved* is, in effect, 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 confrontation and questions that she has in that situation."[36] 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." (274)

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".[37]

C. 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.[38] The newspaper coverage may have been motivated by a variety of reasons, some of them, one intuits, having to do with the exoticism of 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 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 nigguh he was.[39]

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. In would have to

> be something out of the ordinary—something white people 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)

As Levi Coffin noted, the Margaret Garner case "attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy" than any other he had known.

The case became a forum for "that noble anti-slavery lawyer" John Jolliffe, counsel for the defense, 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 an 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 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, ever 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.[40]

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 slave

owner 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 schoolgirls in the Northern school, Iola defends the institution of slavery, claiming that their slaves are "content". One of her school friends 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.'"[41] Significantly, when Iola does discover her racial heritage she begins a mission of education, the biggest part of which 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.[42]

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.[43] 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 was drowned. According to some other reports, Margaret Garner 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.[44] Whatever her fate, at Morrison's hands she has been remembered in order that the institution she suffered may be forgotten.

Chapter Three

Morrison's Hybrid View of History in *Beloved*

We know something, and we imagine the rest.

—*Samuel Johnson*

A. *Beloved* in the Context of Postmodernism

Postmodern theorists Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama asserted that our modern society has reached the "end of history". They argue that we no longer believe in teleological meta-narratives, which is based on a modernist ideology. They believe that our concept of history has become spatial or flattened out, and we inhabit a perpetual present in which images of the past are merely recycled with no understanding of their original context. That is to say, they think that postmodern culture has lost a sense of historical consciousness. Particularly, Fredric Jameson sees literary postmodernism as a by-product of this worldview. His view of history and literature provoked a lot of antagonists to speak out. For example, Linda Hutcheon has written articles of historiographic metafiction. She said that much of postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and can accomplish.

The treatment of history as story in the postmodern novel has often been criticized for sealing off any consideration of the historical real. In his fine essay named "Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread — *Beloved* as Postmodern Novel", however, Rafael Perez-Torres suggests that Morrison's postmodernism results not in a flight away from history, but in a complicated return to reference.

As Bell Hooks argues in her essay "Postmodern Blackness", there is a crucial need for black topic texts to be read in light of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory and its indeterminacies, while maintaining attention to the texts' specific messages for black readers.[45]

Toni Morrison's acclaimed historical novel *Beloved* raises a hybrid vision of history that sheds new light on the postmodern topics, such as the fictionality of history, the blurring of past and present and the questioning of grand historical metanarratives. As an African American writer who lives in modern society, Toni Morrison has her response to similar set of lived conditions with Jameson's. She herself acknowledges this similarity: "Black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier …certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability."[46] Her novel *Beloved* exhibits a postmodern skepticism of official historical narratives. And it also retains African American political commitment (based on the concept of modernism) to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future. Morrison is pulled by the two theoretical and political camps, postmodernism and African American social protest. This condition enabled her to draw the best from both and made her conceive her own concept of history in *Beloved.*

B. *Beloved*: a Hybrid Postmodern Novel

Since the term postmodern has been at the center of many highly charged cultural debates, describing *Beloved* as a hybrid postmodern novel may be a gesture that might draw criticism. Clearly, the novel's status as part of the African American tradition of social protest, and Morrison's investments in the resurrection of authentic history, seem to make the novel incompatible with postmodernism. Morrison herself has spoken out against a postmodernism that she associates with Jameson's terms. But, from many evidences, we can see that Morrison's treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon's postmodern "historiographic metafiction", but her relationship to this discourse is affected by her aim to write "black-topic" texts. Morrison acknowledges that history is always fictional, always a representation, yet she is also committed to the project of recording African American history in order to heal her readers. Instead of a playful exercise in deconstructing history, Morrison's *Beloved* attempts to affect the contemporary world of the real. While we should not simply put this novel into the canon of postmodernism, it should be regarded as contributing a fresh voice to the debates about postmodern history. *Beloved* reminds us that history is not over for African Americans,

who are still struggling to write the history of their people and to keep a historical consciousness alive.

In her novels, interviews and essays, Toni Morrison has expressed opinions that resound with the concerns of both postmodernist theorists and African American social protest.

1. "History" and "history"

Clearly, Morrison is not interested in writing a conventional historical novel. As her essential involvement with the design, editing, and production of the unorthodox historical text called *The Black Book* in the early 1970s further suggests, Morrison has spent her career questioning the very premises of history and historical writing, particularly as they pertain to African Americans and the representation of African Americans and the representation of African-American history. In 1974, Morrison wrote two important essays on *The Black Book* ("Behind the Making of *The Black Book*" and "Rediscovering Black History"), in which she discusses her ideas on what constitutes genuine and useful black history. The goal of her fiction has been not just to recover details of African-American history, but to choose which details are useful for "the village" or the community in the struggle to create a past that can enable African Americans to have a "livable life" in the present and future. (198) The unconventional historicity of *Beloved* is directly linked to Morrison's improvisational exploration of alternative concepts and forms for reconstructing African-American history.

Morrison's historical novels are structured recursively: that is, the narration of present events is continually interrupted by the telling of "background" stories. The nature of these stories from the past tells us something about Morrison's definition of "historical". Neither *Beloved* nor *Jazz* is much interested in narrating fictionalized stories of monumental events. In fact, the tendency in both novels is simply to make passing reference to History with a capital H, as this passage from *Beloved* shows:

> No more discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's Ways and Negro Pews; antislavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner's high-wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio, and the other weighty issues that held them in chairs, scraping the floorboards or pacing them in agony or exhilaration. (173)

By creating such a list, Morrison is not dismissing the significance of these public and political issues for African Americans, but she is insisting that a useful black history not be solely concerned with such matters. Morrison continually prompts her readers to consider what does not get recorded about the realities of black life in America, as reflected in Stamp Paid's internal historicizing:

> Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. (180)

Morrison herself acknowledges and occasionally reifies the rift by defining herself in interviews as an antipostmodernist author of black-topic texts, written to pass on agency to her black readers.[47] Certainly, Morrison's works seem to be defined by the prefixes "pre" or "re" rather than "post". In *Beloved* she is more concerned with origins, cycles, and reconstructing agency than with decadence and self-parody. Both *Beloved* and *Jazz* are set in time period of birth and regeneration — the age of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

Despite her reluctance to associate her work with postmodernism, Morrison does have produced a hybrid cultural work. Her narrative attempts to approximate "true history" while remaining aware of the limits and impossibility of truth or of any historical metanarrative. Although Morrison demystifies master historical narratives, she also wants to raise "real" or authentic African American history in its place. She deconstructs capitalized History while she reconstructs history with small letter. She believes that "history" includes, of course, not only those great and obviously influential persons and events that we usually think of, but also the ordinary, the everyday, the apparently trivial. *Beloved* offers a dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that is a distinctly postmodern strategy.

2. Historical Deconstruction

In her historical novel Morrison tries to pursue authenticity, but at the same time she accepts the poststructuralist critique of the idea of a single totalizing Truth or History.

While she sees herself as a creative historian who reconstructs, Morrison also works to deconstruct master narratives of official history in *Beloved*. The novel is a counter-narrative to the master narrative. One example of which is the newspaper account of Margaret Garner's deed, a document that reappears in the novel as a harsh official alternative to Sethe's emotional interpretation of events. In this novel, the appearance of the newspaper clipping is one of the few intrusions of the dominant culture's process of historical documentation. Morrison drops only a few references to historically recognizable "encyclopedia" events of the period. For example, the Fugitive Slave Bill, the historical fact that provokes Sethe's infanticide, is mentioned only in parentheses (171). Even more striking is her rendering of the Civil War, the apocalypse of American national history, as a minor, inconsequential event in the lives of these former slaves. As Denver lovingly remembers the gift of Christmas cologne she received as a child, she mentions casually and offhandedly that she received it during "one of the war years". (28) Paul D's haunting memory of the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, outweighs the significance of his participation in the war, of which we learn only in the last few pages of the book. The private realities of persecution and daily survival matter more to Sethe and Paul D than any dates or public documents worthy of note in a history textbook. Paul D recognizes that prejudice and racism certainly did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation or the surrender of the Confederate Army: "The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it." (52) Morrison attempts to redefine history as an amalgamation of local narratives, as a jumble of personal as well as publicly recorded triumphs and tragedies.

In 1974, Morrison sounds like a postmodernist, criticizing contemporary literature's historical travesties. But in *Beloved* she has offered a different conception of the relationship between history and fiction. She acknowledges that all history is imagined, and that all knowledge of the past is derived from representations, such as *Beloved* itself. Morrison attempts to draw a historical portrait closer to life lived, but she recognizes that no totalizing truth can ever be reached. Morrison's fictional work offers a different theory of "postmodernist history" than does Jameson, and critics who try to read Morrison's work through Jameson's theory. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, the fundamental problem with Jameson's formulation is his rigid distinction between authentic history and inauthentic historicism. Jameson describes our postmodern society as one "bereft of all

historicity, whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles ... the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts".[48] For Morrison, history and historicism are one and the same, and she questions the assumption that there is a knowable reality behind the inauthentic simulation or representation.

3. Historical Reconstruction Through Representation

Despite the indeterminacies of her fiction, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be read as an overt and passionate quest to fill the blanks neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the "disremembered and unaccounted for". (274) Rejecting the artificial distinction between fiction and history, Morrison considers artists to be the "truest of historians".[49] In "Site of Memory", Toni Morrison explicitly describes the project of writing *Beloved* as one of fictional reconstruction or "literary archeology", of imagining the inner life of the slave woman Margaret Garner, her source for Sethe. Like Denver's efforts to reconstruct the past through storytelling, Morrison's narrative has succeeded in "giving blood to the scraps... and a heartbeat" to what had been merely an historical curio. (78) The desire to uncover the historical reality of the African American past fuels Morrison's fictional project of literary archeology: "You journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply."[50] Working to fill in the blanks left by the constrained slave narrative genre, she attempts "to rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" in order "to yield up a kind of a truth". (110, 112)

Moments of self-reflexivity in the novel remind the reader that Morrison is constructing a textual representation of the past, just as historians did before her. For example, when Paul D is confronted by the newspaper account of Sethe's deed, the reader is made aware that textual documents often fail to capture life exactly as it is experienced. Although he cannot read, Paul D finds the representation of Sethe's face to be inauthentic: "that ain't her mouth." (154) While Paul D is wrong in denying the truth of Sethe's infanticide, his reaction to the picture of Sethe makes the reader aware of the difference between a real–live original and any simulation. At the same moment, however, the possibility of distinguishing between the real and the reproduction is rendered unstable, and the very concept of authenticity is put into question as Paul D

doubts both the white culture's representation and his own knowledge of the real woman, Sethe. In this scene, Morrison seems to be revising her previous belief that the documents collected in *The Black Book* could offer authentic history as life lived. Now she suggests that a fictional account of the interior life a former slave might be more historically real than actual documents, which were often written from the perspective of the dominant culture. While Morrison reminds us of the slippage between signified in the scene with the newspaper clipping, she also calls attention to the fact that the past is only available to us through textual traces. In *Beloved* newspapers are stacked in a pile in the woodshed, the space in which Sethe kills her baby, and where the resurrected Beloved lures Paul D to have sex. The printed words of the newspapers are metaphoric spectators to the real action of this fictional story. This metaphor allows the writer to point out the gap between representation and reality and to suggest that we can only know the past through discourse. Morrison's project is the idea that new representations can change our perceptions of historical reality.

Morrison's choice of epigraphs also reflects her dual response to the relationship between representation and reality. Linda Hutcheon argues that the inclusion of some special materials, such as epigraphs, serves both to "remind us of the narrativity and fictionality of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity".[51] Morrison's choice of two epigraphs underscores this idea. One points to the historical fact of the Middle Passage, the other to the Bible that has often been received as fact. While the Scriptures themselves blur the boundary between fact and fiction, the "60 million and more" statistic is an estimation gleaned from historical records. Although the Middle Passage was a horrific historical reality, the estimated number is not a verifiable fact because the deaths of slaves were often deemed unworthy of recording. All the lives lost can never be accounted for, because our access to history is always limited by words and by those who have control of textual production. Thus, in beginning her novel with these epigraphs, Morrison seems both to ground her fictional work in historical reality and also to question the possibility of ever finding the historical referent outside of or preceding representation.

As an artist, Morrison places a great deal of faith in the power of representation in order to determine our perception of reality. For her, the character of Beloved has become a piece of living history. According to Morrison, she drew Beloved as a composite of the

dead child of Margaret Garner, and of a dead girl from a Van Der Zee photograph. Morrison remarked passionately in an interview:

> Bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails might be 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 ... she is here now, alive.[52]

Morrison's commitment to resurfacing the dead and paying tribute to black Americans of previous generations has made her works particularly attractive to African American readers. With the novel's newly acquired place in the canon of American literature, Morrison's representation has helped to contribute to the historical consciousness of Americans. The popularity of *Beloved* and the healing power of its representation may have enlarged our culture's understanding of black women's history and of the history of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era.

4. Historical Representation with Holes

Morrison's novel *Beloved* does not aim to fill in all the blanks of the historical past. The result of her literary archeology is not a complete skeleton, but a partial one, with holes deliberately missing or omitted. Because the reconstruction is not total, the reader is engaged in the process of imagining history herself. Although Morrison's historical project is to unveil the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken", (199) many things nevertheless remain inaudible or buried in the novel, and these gaps can be read as characteristically postmodern. When Paul D confronts Sethe with the newspaper clipping about the murder of her child, Sethe is unable to give voice to the unspoken: "she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask."(163) Of course, she continues to try to pin it down throughout the rest of the novel, but rather than a complete and seamless product, the process of putting some of her memory into words is stressed here.

Beloved is a text with many holes and gaps, a testament to the incoherence of life lived, especially the life of a freed slave. For example, the novel begins with Sethe's two sons Howard and Bugler, but we never learn their fate, or that of their father Halle. Who was the girl whose red ribbon Stamp Paid finds attached to a raft? This novel never forgets or underestimates the difficulty of representing the lives of the disremembered

and unaccounted for, "the people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons". (181) The Middle Passage, in which "sixty million and more" slaves died, is another significant gap, which can only be obliquely alluded to in the novel's epigraph, in Sethe's buried memories of her mother's story, and in *Beloved*'s postmodern fragmented narrative that blends the historical past and present. *Beloved*'s disjointed narrative, composed of phrases with no punctuation, calls attention to the visual spaces on the page, a metaphor for the gaps in the storytelling. In *Beloved*'s narrative, "it is always now". (210) Morrison combines imagined scenes of life on the slave ships with details from Beloved and Sethe's stories:

> the little hill of dead people ... the men without skin push them through with poles the woman [Sethe] is there with the face I want the face that is mine ... the woman with my face is in the sea her sharp earrings are gone. (211-12)

Although Morrison has attempted to imagine the terrible space in American history, the blanks cannot be completely bridged, and the psychic trauma on the slave ships can only be narrated elusively.

Unlike a traditional novel with a sequential and meaningful narration, *Beloved* stresses the fact that black Americans, particularly freed slaves, did not experience history as an ordered and linear sequence of events. Morrison's narrative techniques are echoed in the novel by Denver. Denver weaves stories of the past, constructing "out of the string she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved". (76) Both Morrison and Denver weave a porous net with their storytelling, leaving gaps to allow some of the mysterious and unspeakable past to escape narration. Morrison recognizes the important healing powers of narration. And at the same time she understands the limits of representation and of the storytelling process. Linda Hutcheon finds this dual response to narration to be postmodern:

> A plot, be it seen as a narrative structure ... is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. But the simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are part of the postmodern contradictory response to employment.[53]

Although Morrison's narrative strategies share something with postmodern fiction, as described by Linda Hutcheon, we cannot comfortably put *Beloved* into the group of postmodern fictions, such as those works written by Milan Kundera or Thomas Pynchon. Morrison's work does contain strong doses of irony, but the overwhelmingly serious tone and overt political project in the novel make it difficult to describe *Beloved* as parody or playful pastiche. What made Morrison take up her pen is the reconstruction of the erased history of the African American people, rather than playful exercises in form, however politically subversive these aesthetic innovations may be.

Chapter Four

Rewriting the Slave Narrative

We could have told them a different story.

— Harriet Jacobs

Critics generally agree that *Beloved* is a rewriting of the traditional slave narrative. In other words, it is a "contesting revision or rereading of the past". The novel installs and then subverts the genre of the slave narrative effecting formal and thematic renewal from within. Morrison combines her knowledge of the African American past with the power of her imagination in a rethinking of history which foregrounds the fact that historical representation is a human construct. In her own words, she is "trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left—to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that she heard".[54] Morrison elegantly mixes fact and fiction in her revised version of the traditional genre.

A. Traditional Slave Narrative

For the slave, the slave narrative or the autobiography was a way of entering the political scene, of gaining public voice and access to a sympathetic audience through a cultural form of expression supported and encouraged by the abolitionist movement. The main thrust of the slave narrative was the indirect argument for political change and for the abolition of slavery. The classic slave narrative that was shaped in the decade immediately prior to the Civil War provided a popular pattern for the horror of slavery, countenancing resistance, and supporting the campaign for abolition. It is the slave narrative of these decades that are significant not merely for their numbers, but also for the extent to which they shaped and continued to shape our perception of the horrors of slavery. Earlier slave narrative contained a mixture of forms and intents, including polemic, spiritual narrative, adventure, and exemplary biography, a blend that was not given so intensive a polemical focus as the narrative of the ante-bellum period, which

were shaped in large measure by a discourse of victimization. The narrative published in the decade after the Civil War had yet a different agenda, celebrating accomplishments to indicate the progress made since liberation, and appealing for the recognition and full participation that such progress should invite.

1. Aggrandizement of White Power

The polemics of abolition meant that the narratives of the 1840s and 1850s dwelt on the physical hardship and mental anguish of slavery, discrediting it as a civilizing institution, and emphasizing the extent to which slavery violated all accepted notions of decency. With its catalogue of horrors, Theodore Weld's monumental *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) helped to shape both the discourse of abolition and the perception of the realities of slavery for a sympathetic audience. In Weld's account, slavery is primarily defined by its effects on the slave, who is conceived as pure victim.[55] If one looks below the abolitionist discourse, one sees an appreciation of the power of the slaveholder, and ultimately of the white man. In this respect, Toni Morrison's comment in *Playing in the Dark* that "the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" is an apt description of the dynamics of white expectations, perceptions and desires as they shape the form of the slave narrative, disempowering the slave as the narrator presents the shocking facts of his victimization.[56] While no slave narrative is as extreme in its portrayal of victimization as Weld's deliberate catalogue of cruelties, all narratives pander to the abolitionist polemics of victimization. And while slave authors use a variety of techniques to claim back some measure of control over their lives, only rarely do they escape the interpretative framework which bestows meaning on the slave's life within the context of the institution of slavery. The slave may outwit or overpower his master, but their victories focus attention firmly on the struggle against victimization.

As William L. Andrews has pointed out, verbal sparring allowed safer victories to be depicted within the slave narrative, such as renegotiating the meaning of evocative words like "freedom", "master", or "religion", while exposing the hidden power base underlying conventional usage.[57] The slave who triumphed on these grounds, however, faced the threat of imminent violence. The point when the self-liberated slave unnames himself and

takes a new name, with a new identity, marks another moment of personal triumph and self-determination. Such victories as these tend to be circumscribed by the more all-embracing formal structures of the slave narrative that deny authority to the black speaker. As James Olney has argued in "I was Born", the prototypic slave narrative of the period includes, besides the actual narrative; an engraved portrait, signed by the narrator; title page which informs the reader of the provenance of the narrative—written by himself, a friend, related to, etc.; a poetic epigraph; a handful of testimonials; and a documentary appendix or appendices.[58] This supplementary material confers authority on the subject of the narrative, a strategy made necessary by the reluctance of a largely white audience to accept a black writer on his own terms. The slave wanting to tell his story had to follow conventions agreeable to a white audience and shaped by the discourse which defined minority experience within that society.

The opportunities for personal empowerment for the slave, and narrative empowerment for the ex-slave telling his own story, were therefore limited by the structure and structuring assumptions of the classic narrative. Quite apart from the insult of authorizing conventions, the slave telling his story in the form of a slave narrative faced the restricted focus of the narrative's discourse of victimization.

2. Catering to the White Audience

Not only does the classic slave narrative aggrandize white power, it also bows before the dominant middle class sensitivities.

Because the original slave narratives were written in order to influence a sympathetic white audience, certain precautions had to be taken regarding subject matter and the way in which it was treated. The slaves had to be careful not to offend the literary and moral sensibilities of the audience on which they depended for support. As a result, there was a great deal of tension involved in writing the slave narrative. And despite the urge to reveal the truths about the horrors of slavery, the slave narrative was indirectly censored by its historical and political context. This meant that in addition to omitting scenes which were considered too disgusting or which might even turn the audience against the writer, value judgments were scarce and often excused if they happened at all. Thus, the title of Harriet Jacobs' famous narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) subtly directs its readers' attention to the fact that the events related in the narrative represent a

careful selection rather than the whole, unfiltered truth. In *Beloved* Morrison imagines what the slave narrative would have been like if oppressive forces had not been at work influencing formal choices as well as content.

The slave narrative's mere recounting of events excluded any attempts at self-understanding. The rich spiritual life of African Americans was deliberately suppressed. The reason is that its presence would only serve to confirm established racist beliefs held by whites. In her essay "The Site of Memory", Morrison points to the tragic consequences of not being able to represent all aspects of slave existence and of not being faithful to authentic experience: "the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told—is precisely the problem in the discourse that preceded without us."

3. Action-oriented Narrative Structure and Limited Point of View

The point of view chosen for the classic narrative also has its limitations; it is the story of a single individual and is told from a single point of view, that of the escaped slave; we are given only a small amount of information about others who are important to that individual, or whose stories add to the graphic depiction of the horrors of slavery. In order to overcome the limitations of a first person perspective with its limited personal experience, the narrative is often broken by testimony, which concerns the fate of other slaves to feast upon a wider range of horrors.

The narrative structure of the classic narrative introduces more limitations. The plot tends to be linear with the events arranged chronologically and related simply, telling the story of learning the full horror of slavery, either following captivity, growing up, or on being sold.[59] The narrator establishes that slavery is unendurable. They attempt to escape, either by running away or by purchasing freedom. It may take several attempts before the narrator succeeds, for the narrative makes it clear that escape from slavery is fraught with danger. Freedom is often bought at the cost of isolation, for friends and family have been left behind. When the narrator finally does escape, he or she tells what it is like to be free, and how desperate he is to retain his had-earned freedom. Nonetheless, such odes to freedom can seem oddly grafted to the story, for the narrative structure of the classic slave narrative is centered on action rather than feelings.

B. Morrison's Project of Rewriting the Traditional Slave Narrative

Morrison set herself the challenge of writing a revisionary slave narrative, one that would do justice to Garner's stupendous act of resistance. Herself a scholar of this genre, Morrison summed up the limitations imposed on the nineteenth-century writer of the slave narrative: "It was extremely important" that "the writers of those narratives appear as objective as possible—not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage."[60] They had to be careful not to be inflammatory:

> The milieu... dictated the purpose and the style. The narratives are instructive, moral and obviously representative. Some of them are patterned after the sentimental moral that was in vogue at the time. But whatever the level of eloquence or the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience... Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate". In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forget" many things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe... But, most importantly—at least for me—there was no mention of their interior life. For me, a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman – the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil draw over "proceedings too terrible to relate". The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.[61]

1. Narrative Structure and Point of View in *Beloved*

In *Beloved,* Morrison covers the area with which the classic slave narrative is concerned, but in a way that circumvents the limitations of the action-oriented classic narrative, as well as its single point of view.

The reader must reconstruct the story line gradually in *Beloved*, as more and more of the past is revealed through memories evoked by present situations. In *Beloved*, this emphasizes the way the past intrudes on and shapes our reactions to and feelings about the present.

In *Beloved*, set in 1873 and 1874, ten years after Emancipation, Morrison's

characters slowly begin to take stock of the past. In most slave narratives, the past, its typicalness and inhumanity having been sketched, is something to leave behind. Charting the journey back from the free present to the slave past, *Beloved* reverses the progressive movement of the slave narrative. Further, while the slave narrative privileged the individual's account of coming to selfhood—in which the single, heroic self is fixed in the "I" of the subject and the tale ends with the victory of freedom—Morrison's narrative removes the individual from its center, giving way to a multiplicity of voices. In *Beloved*, the memories are as complex as the people who tell, repeat, and improvise them; narrative becomes a collective, interactive enterprise. The effect of several individuals dealing with their pasts is a collective remembrance and purging. Ashraf Rushdy observed that in Morrison's novels, *Beloved* in particular, "memory exists as a communal property of friends, of family, of a people. The magic of memory is that it is interpersonal, that it is the basis for constructing relationships with the other who also remembers".[62]

Morrison uses psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather than lived experience, to emphasize the importance of perception. The most obvious way in which Morrison reworks the slave narrative is in the narrative strategies she employs, which add to the richness and texturing of the story, especially when compared with flat, one dimensional handling of plot in the slave narrative, and which allow feelings, perception, and psychology to be given more emphasis.

2. Description of White Power in *Beloved*

The most significant implication of this shift in focus concerns the depiction of violence. By restoring the largely unexplored area of interior experience to the story of the slave narrative, and by giving fuller attention to relationships, Morrison alters the context in which violence is viewed. On the one hand, this shift allows an acknowledgment of the psychological trauma that can be as significant as physical injury; on the other, it allows Morrison to recognize the supporting and healing powers within the black community. Taken together, these make it possible for Morrison to recount scenes of appalling brutality without pandering to white self-aggrandizement. Instead, Morrison undertakes a much more complex examination of the interpersonal dynamics of violence. She directly confronts the issue of sexual violation in *Beloved*, an unspeakable subject for the slave narrative. We have the repeatedly evoked scene of violation which is

echoed by Baby Suggs's inability to love the child she carried in return for a broken promise not to sell one of her other children. It is echoed in Ella's bitterness, and more indirectly, by Halle's madness and Stamp Paid's pain.

Morrison's handling of violence and victimization breaks the limited perspective of the traditional slave narrative, transforming a discourse of victimization into a narrative of the capacity of individuals and communities to support and heal those subjected to brutality. *Beloved* is a book which describes or alludes to hanging, rape, shooting, beating, sexual assault and harassment, which has its characters bound, collared, mistreated in a variety of gruesome ways and which depicts the murder and attempted murder by bloody means of four small children by their mother. But it is surprising that the reader does not feel that the material has been treated in a way that sensationalizes the violence.

But Morrison never focuses on the act of victimization for very long; instead, she quickly shifts her attention to the way characters deal with and help one another to deal with the pain, anger, and sense of shame brought about by victimization. After Paul A has been shot, Sixo burned, and Paul D shackled and restrained with an iron collar, the following conversation takes place. Seethe has come to see Paul D and ask for news:

> "You saw Sixo die? You sure?"
> "I'm sure."
> "Was he woke when it happened? Did he see it coming?"
> "He was woke. Woke and laughing."
> "Sixo laughed?"
> "You should have heard him, Sethe."
> Sethe's dress steams before the little fire over which she is boiling water. It is hard to move about with shackled ankles and the neck jewelry embarrasses him. In his shame he avoids her eyes, but when he doesn't he sees only black in them — no white. She says she is going, and he thinks she will never make it to the gate, but he doesn't dissuade her. He knows he will never see her again, and right then and there his heart stopped. (228)

You can see Sethe and Paul D assessing Sixo's pain and defiance. You can see Paul D's own sense of degradation. Considering the situation which Paul D finds himself in—his concern for Sethe's feelings, his sense of Sixo's triumph, his own humiliation and his acknowledgment of his love for Sethe—the combination of all these into his reaction reveal him to be a sensitive and complex character. It is interesting that when, years later,

Paul D recalls the incident, he recalls it in the context of recognizing how important Sethe is to him. As he watches Sethe, recovering in bed from the ordeal of Beloved's exorcism, his mind goes back to the first hours of their reunion at 124, and he remembers her "wrought-iron back". Then, after noticing again her mouth "still puffy" from Ella's fist, he returns to the moments before Sethe ran away from Sweet Home:

> The wet dress was steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry – its tree wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. (273)

Here the crudity of treatment the sensitivity and complexity of human interaction go together: we have the man who maintains his dignity despite being treated like a beast, and whose dignity and worth are affirmed by another person even while he suffers humiliation.

In *Beloved*, the warping power of the white man's domination is acknowledged; his power to cripple, to maim, to abuse, and to humiliate. The horror of white domination, as Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Sethe realize, is "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". (251) This warping power is set against the redemptive possibilities within the black community; its ability to care, to heal, and to shield its members. The preaching that Baby Suggs does in the clearing is part of that healing process. Unlike the religious spiritual narratives, Baby Suggs "did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure". (88) Hers is a more humanistic message; what she tells them is that they must learn, not only despite all that the whites have done to them, but because of all that the whites have done to them, to reclaim themselves and to love themselves and each other. Baby Suggs' healing gift in the clearing brings the community together, as she provides a narrative of pride, love and acceptance in place of the heritage of degradation and shame imbibed from their slave masters.

3. Historical Exploration in Depth

a. Comparison Between *Beloved* and *Incidents*

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* gives examples of the blanks Morrison is attempting to fill in *Beloved.* Issues that Jacobs' narrative is only able to hint at or skin superficially Morrison's novel is able to explore in depth.

Having read *Beloved*, one can hear and read the silences in Jacobs' story. We are more alert to her elisions, such as this one: "No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery.... The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers."[63] In *Beloved*, Morrison is explicit about the white master, also called "school teacher", and his nephews' brutality and obscenity. Jacobs wrote that when Dr. Flint, her abusive master, learned that she was going to be a mother, "he was like a restless spirit from the pit": "He came every day; and I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe. I would not describe them if I could; they were too low, too revolting."[64] In contrast, Morrison is explicit about the rape of the maternal body: school teacher and his nephews steal Sethe's milk, and after putting her pregnant stomach in a hole in the grand (to save the unborn slave), lash her back. Anne Goldman suggestively connects the theft of Sethe's milk to the appropriation of Sethe's ink by school teacher: "both the body and the word become commodified," "texts upon which the white man makes his mark."[65] It is this scene of the theft that drives her husband Halle insane because, as Jacobs wrote, "the husband of a slave has no power to protect her".[66] The fear of offending the sensibilities of her white audience and the fear of being judged by the prevailing (double) standards of womanly conduct prevented Jacobs from giving an adequate representation of her brutal experience; she could only say: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."[67]

Morrison is able to demonstrate the truth of Jacobs' statement by focusing on every phase of a slave woman's life, from infancy to childhood, from girlhood to motherhood, and on to old age. *Beloved* makes brutally clear that aside from the "equality of oppression" that black men and women suffered, black women were also oppressed as women. They were routinely subjected to rape, enforced childbirth, and enforced to get

away from their children. As Morrison's novel shows, physical abuse is humiliating, but the added emotional pain of a mother is devastating. Here, too, Jocobs held back, recounting without much emotion her brief reunion with her separated daughter in a short chapter entitled "The Meeting of Mother and Daughter". Margaret Garner's story enables Morrison to explore the passion of the slave mother and the anguish of the mother-child relationship. The grandmother character, Baby Suggs, amplifies Jacobs' grandmother, of whose nine children only one was left and of whom she wrote, "I knew that she had been slowly murdered; and left that my troubles had helped to finish the work".[68] The pathos of Baby Suggs, whose resilient spirit is eventually broken, is captured by the image of her retiring to ponder on pieces of color. Like *Beloved*, *Incidents* is about a woman's persistent resistance to slavery: "My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each."[69] Jacobs makes it clear, as does Margaret Garner, that for her it was either "freedom or the grave".[70]

Morrison also portrays the mother's deed as a heroic act of resistance. Sethe's killing her child is not presented as an anomaly: Ella, the good woman of the town who assists Stamp Paid on the Underground Railroad, "had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathering by 'the lowest yet'", a white father and son who had held her in captivity and raped her; the child dies after five days of neglect. Sethe's mother abandoned the children white men forced upon her, keeping only Sethe, who is born of an African father; Sethe's mother "threw them all away but her. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away." (259) By making resistance, central to the experience of all slave women, not just the official history books, Morrison dissolves the stereotype of the mammy figure.

In *Beloved,* Morrison is interested in investigating the cost of such resistance, in exploring what the killing of the child did to the psyche of a mother like Margaret Garner. What is the psychological, emotional state of such an individual? Of the seven long years Harriet Jocobs spent in a garret hiding from her master—in a place so cramped she did not have room to stand, where she could hear her children but not reach out to them—we are told remarkably little. What must she have endured? It is *Beloved,* with its confinement of the reader to 124 Blue Stone Road and its inmates' interiority, which gives us some sense of what that experience might have been like. From the first line of the novel ("124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."), the reader is plunged into the

haunted house and troubled memories of Morrison's characters.

Now, a century later, it is possible for the black artist to remember, to grieve, and to undertake the journey into unacknowledged regions of pain and anger and loss. As a race, it was expedient to keeping going. Observing that "nothing came down orally to my generation of that experience on the slave ship", Morrison attributed this collective effacement of the past to "some survivalist intention to forget". It took Toni Morrison's *Beloved* one hundred years to emerge; in the novel, it takes Sethe eighteen years before she stops to linger over the crevices in the self, and when she does, they engulf her. Remembering makes Sethe lose herself in the past and lose her job. Historically, a beleaguered people could not afford to look back; they had to keep going to meet the demands of the present. However, self-preservation is not the only explanation for the delayed recall of the past, which though forgotten remains latent. As Sethe's delayed response shows, historical experience itself is a belated experience.

Likewise, the representation of a historical trauma is belated, its articulation relying on material and ideological conditions, such as the climate of literary and political receptivity. In her discussion of the contemporary burgeoning of historical novel by black women writers, Barbara Christian reminds us that black women have written historical novels before, and that "there are pieces written by African American women during the periods about which … contemporary novels are written".[71] The point to note is that they were underwritten in some respects (reticent, masked, coded) and overwritten in others (patterned after the sentimental novel).

b. Comparison Between *Beloved* and *Iola Leroy*

Even when slavery is the subject of literature after emancipation, the psychological pain of the slaved is seldom dealt with. The focus is on erasing the scene of colonial violation.

Frances Harper, an active abolitionist and suffragist and daughter of free black parents, can only make brief mention of the horror of slavery in her novel *Iola Leroy*, set in the Reconstruction period. A passing reference to the story of Margaret Garner is wedged into an argument countering the heroine's schoolgirl notions about contented and happy slaves. Far from feeling free to represent the brutality of slavery, Frances Harper must make Iola an octoroon, almost white, and very naïve so that she may be more easily fused into the white reader's horizon. When Iola, a slave-holder's daughter, defends

slavery, saying her father's slaves are content and do not oppose the institution, her northern friend cites the case of Margaret Garner: "'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.'"[72] Harper does not explore the psychological dimensions of the characters who have emerged from slavery. Her novel is structured like a debate, with exemplary characters taking ideal stances. From Harper's point of view, the race is on trial; since the judge is biased, much energy is spent on presenting tidy resolutions, on proving that blacks could handle their freedom. Black families are sentimentally united and live a model life together in this novel subtitled *Shadows Uplifted*. Morrison, however, is in a position to resist the imperative to uplift and goes for the shadows. The family cohesion of *Iola Leroy* is shattered in *Beloved*, a novel that insists, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another". (95)

Chapter Five

Voice and Narrative Authority

Until the lions have their own historians, the hunt will always be told from the point of view of the hunter.

— African Proverb

Finding voice and telling personal histories marked the inscription into history of the formerly marginalized in the second half of the 20th century. African American women began to explore a culturally specific interior life linking the experiences of racial and sexual oppression. Self-understanding and self-definition became a major concern in the telling of hitherto unheard stories about spiritual life, sexuality, and survival on the margins of white American society. Finding voice is thus intimately connected with constructing new identities, being the definer rather than the defined. *Beloved* continues and develops this newly established tradition. In the novel, by telling their stories and voicing the "unspeakable things unspoken", the characters gain voice and transform themselves from objects to subjects. As Linda Hutcheon points out, this transformation of the self and the subsequent challenge to historical authority is characteristic of the postmodern valuing of plurality and difference over hierarchies and absolute power structures.

A. Absence of Voice

Concern with the dominant and controlling narrative is an important theme in *Beloved*. Critics have noted the figure of schoolteacher in *Beloved*, who stands as the quintessential figure of white male authority, wielding the power of the word as well as the whip. Using ink that Sethe herself has made, he instructs his nephews to inscribe her animal characteristics alongside her human ones, uses a bit to silence the voice of Paul D, and discourages a Sweet Home slave from talking back by beating him "to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined". (190) Paul D insists on denying

that the picture in the newspaper concerning the slaughter of her own child is really of Sethe ("it's not her mouth", meaning this is not her voice, her story), because appearing in a newspaper could only mean bad news for a black person. Sethe's story is appropriated again by white people in order to further the cause of Abolition, but Sethe's voice is silenced.

Morrison's narrative plays not just with language but also with the traces of ideology that leave their mark in language. At this level, the significance of linguistic play that is not simply play makes itself manifest. Language, never innocent of power, becomes in Morrison's text a central means by which power disperses itself. The language of slavery within *Beloved* is comprised of signs written with whips, fires and ropes. It is this discourse that is literally inscribed on Sethe's back by the dispassionate and evil figure of schoolteacher.

Schoolteacher appears after the death of Mr. Garner in order to help Mrs. Garner run Sweet Home. Faceless, nameless, he becomes the speaking subject of slavery's discourse. Taking advantage of his position as possessor of language, he notes with scientific detachment the animal-like characteristics of Sweet Home's slaves. He has his nephews do the same: "'No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up.'" (193) Sethe's identity, circumscribed by these "scientific" practices, is subject to the effects of schoolteacher's discourse. As often happens, the treatment she receives as an object of discourse transforms her into an object of violence. She tells Paul D, the only Sweet Home man who escaped slavery alive and whole: "Those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. ... Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.'" (16-17) Sethe's body is doubly violated: once when its nutriments are stolen, then again when torn open by a whip. Just like the page of schoolteacher's notebook, Sethe is divided, and marked, inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation.

Throughout the narrative, the hard language of its voice is heard: Sethe's mother is hanged; Sixo is burned alive and shot; Paul A, mutilated beyond recognition, swings from the trees of the Sweet Home farm. The bodies of these characters become the texts on which their identity is written. In a lesson brought home again and again, the power of

the word is made manifest in the world. Power belongs, as schoolteacher tries to show, to those who define words and not to the defined.

B. The Attainment of Voice

Yet the defined do not entirely lack power. Those who live with the absence of power reserve to themselves the persistent practice of decoding and recoding signs. The result is that the texts on which the masters have inscribed one meaning reinscribe those self-same signs and have them signify something new. The master's text becomes the subject rather than the object of language, a master of rather than a slave to discourse.

Both Sethe (a black slave) and Amy Denver (a white indentured servant) know the bonds of slavery and sexual violation. The two women meet as they each seek to escape their position as objects of oppressive discursive practices. For Amy, running away to Boston and stumbling on the battered, pregnant Sethe, the woman's bloody back is not a mark of her slavery. Rather she exclaims, "'It's a tree. ... A chokecherry tree. See, here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if there ain't blossoms.'" (79) Both women have been marked by their position as owned property. As the marks of slavery inscribed on the one are transformed by the other into signs signifying an image of fruition instead of oppression, Amy gives back to Sethe her identity as a nurturing source.

The power to rename represents reclamation of agency when many other venues are closed that would help the characters establish a sense of subjectivity. At the center of this need to name stands again the sense of absence found throughout *Beloved*. In this instance, the absence of names returns to haunt African American life. As Toni Morrison explains,

> among blacks, we have always suffered being nameless. We didn't have names because ours are those of the masters which were given to us with indifference and don't represent anything for us. It's become a common practice, among the community, to give a name to some one according to their characteristics: it's life that gives you a name, in a way.[73]

Blacks are "nameless" because given names cannot recover a pre-slave past. The community bestows names upon people. Through a communal act of re-christening, black people construct a self that is a counteraction of the disempowerment of a slave

past. This practice of renaming is a way of creating a historical self-identity. For the African American, self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven. Naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism. All of African American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America. Naming becomes a means of bridging the violent gaps left by history.

One such gap presents itself to Sethe after her escape to Ohio and her reunion with her children. Sought out by slave catchers and schoolteacher, Sethe refuses to allow her children to be taken back to the inhumanity of slavery. In the face of this threat, Sethe marks her baby with a most profound form of inscription. She draws a handsaw across her throat.

Sethe stakes her position in the world of the novel by using the only form of discourse she has at hand. The power to name is the power to mark, the power to locate and identify. This is the power Sethe assumes for herself in deciding the fate of her children. Yet this power does not emerge from nowhere: the language Sethe uses to mark her child is a language she had learned early in life and had nearly forgotten. Only in a moment of desperation does it reemerge. Sethe recalls being raised, along with the rest of the slave children, by the one-armed nurse Nan. She was the one who took care of the children, nursed the babies, and did the cooking:

> And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now… The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along … She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "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. You she* gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (62)

The only baby Sethe's mother accepted bears the name of the only man she took in her arms. The other babies she rejects. Sethe learns from Nan not the linguistic code of her African past, but another code of absence, of silence. This language impressed history by denying to it another victim of oppression. Sethe's language, like her mother's language, is one of denial and rejection. Hers is a discourse – a language of desperation –

that says No to that which is not acceptable. Sethe practices this discourse in a woodshed. Her instrument is a handsaw; her text is her beloved baby; her sign is the mark of a great refusal: "If she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple." (163)

The meaning of Sethe's refusal to accept the unacceptable and of her assertion of her own agency is, however, lost. Others appropriate her story of desperation in order to serve their own ends. Her actions and the significance of her discourse are misconstrued in the rush to turn her story into other stories that have, ultimately, nothing to do with Sethe and her family. As the telling is altered, the story told is no longer Sethe's. First the events are circumscribed by the newspapers of the day: "A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since her face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob." (155-156) After the newspapers, the abolitionists take up Sethe's cause, adding fuel to the fire of anti-slavery passion. Like Owen Bodwin, the man who helped Sethe and her family escaped slavery, the abolitionists find in Sethe a cause and not a human being: "The Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case of abolishing slavery. Good years, they were, full of spit and conviction." (260) Caught between the sensationalism of the newspapers and the inflammatory rhetoric of the abolitionists, Sethe's story disappears.

To tell her story again to make clear the meaning of what she has done, Sethe would like every word she heard the preacher say at her baby's funeral engraved on the headstone: "Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver.... That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust." (5) Beloved is thus twice marked: once with a handsaw and once with a chisel. Both are legitimate expressions of a difficult discourse. Each rushes to fill the absences left by other discourse pressed physically and psychically upon Sethe and her progeny – slavery, patriarchy, exploitation, and violation. Together in the novel, these discourses form constellations of meaning that prove insufficient in the face of Sethe's own sense of her family's humanity. The novel follows how the inscription of discourses reveals the necessity for a transformation of meaning and, thus, serves as witness to how the inadequacies of one discourse need to be fulfilled by another.

C. Hearing the Voice

Beloved is a story 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. Denver is the filtering ear for Sethe's process of self-discovery. It is important that Denver, the signifying daughter, hears what Sethe has to say.

Beloved is a novel that constructs its ideal "listener". Denver will tell and re-tell the story that she now understands. Denver uses the knowledge of "horror", transmitted to her aurally, to perform a healing narrative—orally. 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 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"[74]. 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 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.[75]

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".[76] 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 any more; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago."[77] Those stories must have a place in African American culture, and they've found their place in the novel. The novel becomes for Morrison the site of an oral history passed from generation to generation. Because all those ancestors 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.

In this novel, 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 signifying history represents this struggle for the validation of orality. 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) 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) The slaves would sing songs that "to many would seem

unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves"[78].

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 converse 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 struck their needle beaks right through her head cloth 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 could 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 relationship, Sethe is able to understand herself. The code becomes unlocked and available for her hearing. 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.

Beloved is based on a variety of discrete oral linguistic communities; and its story is about the establishment of a communal narrative. 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. *Beloved* is concerned with demonstrating the variety and continuousness or 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.

D. Narrative Authority

Throughout the novel *Beloved*, the text highlights the various processes by which stories, traditional and contemporary, oral and written, are told. The tale of Sethe's escape and Denver's birth, the infanticide and the aftermath, are all told by or remembered through the consciousness of various characters – Denver, Sethe, Stamp Paid, Beloved – as well as through the voice of the modern narrator who frames the entire narrative. From the first page of the novel, this twentieth-century voice creates a tension between the fictional past and the moment of narration. The narrator explains that the site of the novel, 124 Bluestone Road, "didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years …". (36) The narrative brings to the fore the temporal disjuncture between the narrative present and the fictional past characteristic of the novelistic form. *Beloved* also focuses on how stories are told by one person to another as a means of articulating the accumulated wisdom of communal thought and of hearing the dead through the voices of the living.

In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison talks about the evocation of a community voice in her novels:

> The fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories. They are just told—meanderingly—as though they are going in several directions at the same time. … I am not experimental, I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books—the something that defines what makes a book "black". And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not. The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form

> reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework.[79]

Morrison's explanation suggests reliance upon collective thinking and impersonal memory, the telling and interpretation of stories through multiple voices.

Rather than confirm storytelling as a singularly "authentic" form of communication, Morrison's text engages with the numerous ways—official and unofficial, central and decentralized, privileged and marginal—narratives function in multicultural spaces. Numerous voices retell the same event, each from different perspectives, and none taking precedence over the others. The story of Denver's birth, for example, emerges at different points in the narrative. Each time, a different facet of the story is presented so that together they form the same and yet distinct stories.

The first evocation comes after that moment of vision when Denver looks through the window of 124 Bluestone and seés Beloved hugging Sethe. Denver turns from the window and follows the well-worn path around the house: "Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window. … And to get back to the part of the story she liked best, she had to start way back: hear the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot." (29) Though we know that "the magic of her birth, its miracle in fact, testified to … friendliness as did her own name", it is not until fifty pages later that we learn the source of Denver's appellation—the white girl in search of velvet, Amy Denver. Sethe too tells a version, though abbreviated, of Denver's birth to Paul D: "'Nothing bad can happen to her. Look at it. Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver. Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it—which meant she wasn't going to make it either—she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill. The last thing you'd expect to help.'" (42) Later still, Denver prepares to tell the same story to Beloved: "She swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved." (76) And then the story: "'She had good hands, she said. The whitegirl, she said, had thin little arms but good hands. She saw that right away, she said. Hair enough for five heads and good hands, she said.'" (76-77) Presently, the narrative gives way to another voice, the third-person narration told by the omniscient twentieth-century speaker.

Each telling, each version of Denver's birth, shares similar phrases and images: the wild onions into which Sethe fails, the bloody back of the runaway slave, the swollen feet, the river birth. No one telling ultimately takes precedence over the next. Each, rather, adds information through the telling. This repetition and variation creates a sense of the story as always having been present and that one is hearing again a story with which one is already familiar. In this respect, the strategy suggests the quality of orality. The repetition and variation also suggests that there is no authoritative view by which to judge Denver's birth. Despite the potential desire on the part of a sympathetic reader to view the oral elements of *Beloved* as a privileged discourse, its presence within the narrative serves incessantly to disrupt authority.

Authority in *Beloved* becomes subject to a double impulse. One is a move towards an original source, a true and powerful form of discourse—the slave narrative, the rural narrative, and the folk narrative—as an integral part of Morrison's technique. Simultaneously, there is the implicit and explicit argument made that this is a story that has yet to be told, that cannot be told, cannot be understood. Consequently, numerous forms of narration are called upon to convey the partial information of an inevitably fragmented story. *Beloved* resists notions of a centralized authority while not denying that forms of authority—both central and marginal—yet exist in the world.

Chapter Six

Historical Recovery

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

— Toni Morrison

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, history making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author. In the novel, Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process. Sethe, the central character in the novel, describes the relationship between the individual and the historical unconscious:

> *If a house burns down, it's* gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (36)

If Sethe's individual memories exist in the world as fragments of a historical memory, then by extension, the individual process of recollection or "rememory" can be reproduced on a historical level. Thus, Sethe's process of healing in *Beloved*, her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live.

In *Beloved*, Morrison negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. The novel challenges the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. Morrison delves into the stories and souls of black folk to tap the resources of memory and imagination as tools of strength and healing.

Morrison uses ritual as a model for the healing process. Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations—such as dance, song, story, and other

activities—are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world. Through her assertion of the transformative power of ritual and the incorporation of rituals of healing into her narrative, Morrison invests the novel with the potential to construct and transform individual consciousness as well as social relations.

The central ritual of healing—Sethe's "rememory" of and confrontation with her past — and the reader's ritual of healing correspond to the three sections of the novel. In part one the arrival first of Paul D then of Beloved forces Sethe to confront her past in her incompatible roles as a slave and as a mother. Moving from the fall of 1873 to the winter, the second part describes Sethe's period of atonement, during which she is enveloped by the past, isolated in her house with Beloved, who forces her to suffer over and over again all the pain and shame of the past. Finally, part three is Sethe's ritual "clearing", in which the women of the community aid her in casting out the voracious Beloved, and Sethe experiences a repetition of her scene of trauma with a difference—this time she aims her murderous hand at the white man who threatens her child.

The three phases of the reader's ritual also involve a personal reckoning with the history of slavery. In part one, stories of slavery are accumulated through fragmented recollections, culminating in the revelation of Sethe's murder of her child in the last chapters of the section. In part two, the reader is immersed in the voices of despair. Morrison presents the internal voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in a ritual chant of possession, while Paul D and Stamp Paid are also overwhelmed by the legacy of slavery. The last part of the novel is the reader's "clearing", achieved through the comic relief of the conversation of Paul D and Stamp Paid and the hopeful reunion of Sethe and Paul D. The novel concludes with Denver's emergence as the new teacher, providing the reader with a model for a new pedagogy and the opportunity for the reconstruction of slave history from a black woman's perspective.

A. Baby Suggs and Rituals of Healing

Two ghosts impel the healing process in *Beloved*: Baby Suggs, holy, acts as a ritual guide, and Beloved, the ghost-woman, acts as a psychological catalyst for the three central (living) characters. The healing ritual in *Beloved* can be broken down into three stages: the first stage is the repression of memory that occurs from the traumas of slavery;

the second stage entails a painful reconciliation with these memories; and the third is the "clearing" process, a symbolic rebirth of the sufferer. Baby Suggs provides a moral background for the first stage and a ritual model for the last. Beloved embodies the second stage, compelling the characters in her "family" to face all the pain and shame of their memories.

In *Beloved*, the ritual method of healing, of initiating the participant\reader, and of interpreting the world are represented by the lessons of Baby Suggs, whose spiritual power has earned her appellation holy among her people. Baby Suggs conducts rituals outdoors in the Clearing, a place that signifies the necessity for a psychological cleansing from the past, a space to encounter painful memories safely and rest from them. The day Baby Suggs becomes free, after more than sixty years of slavery, she notices her own heartbeat and is thrilled at owning her own body for the first time. Baby Suggs then "open(s) her great heart to those could use it" by becoming an "unchurched preacher" (87). Baby Suggs creates a ritual, out of her own heart and imagination, to heal former slaves and enables them to seek a reconciliation with their memories, whose scars survive long after the experience of slavery has ended.

According to Baby Suggs' morality, good and evil are indefinable, not based on absolute knowledge. They are part of a situational ethics. "'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop.'" (87) Slavery exemplifies the connection between a lack of morality and a lack of limitations. Baby Suggs made this her last pronouncement before she died—"the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. 'They don't know when to stop,' she said." (104) The lack of limitations of the white people is shown over and over as the destruction of the slaves. The story of Halle's going mad, Sethe's murder of her baby, Paul D's memories of Mister and the bit – all demonstrated the connection to the white slaveholding society's immorality, its lack of human limitations on its actions, that reciprocates in the minds of its victims as too much suffering to be endured. In Morrison's powerful description of double consciousness, Stamp Paid thinks, "...it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them". (198)

Although Baby Suggs' dying words of despair condemn white people, Morrison

makes it clear that race is not an absolute division either. Clearly within the context of American slavery, racial oppression is inseparable from social domination and abuses of power. But in *Beloved*, the white "slave" Amy Denver helps Sethe to cross the river to freedom and acts as a midwife for the birth of Denver, Sethe's little daughter. The similarity between the two women's situations supercedes their mutual, racially based mistrust, indicating that class relations are central in shaping racial differences.

Because the white people don't know "'when to stop'", as Baby Suggs says, slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering. The overwhelming pain of the past necessitates a closing down of memory, as it does for Sethe, who "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe". (6) But traumatic repression causes neurosis, and although Sethe's suppression of memory enables her to survive and remain sane, it also leads to a stultifying and isolated life. Paul D has a concrete image of his repression:

> He would keep the rest of his past where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister's comb beating in him. (72-73)

Paul D and Sethe have found it necessary to lock away their memories and their emotions as a means of surviving the extreme pains of their past. Baby Suggs understands the lack of moral limits of the white slaveholders and the limits of psychological endurance of the black slaves that make up the devastating dynamic of slavery. Baby Suggs is already dead when the novel begins, but her ritual in the Clearing is a model of the process of healing that Paul D and Sethe must undergo to free their hearts from the pain and shame of the past.

B. Beloved: an Embodiment of the Past

Amy Denver tells Sethe that "'anything dead coming back to life hurts'". (35) Beloved makes this maxim literal, as the physical manifestation of suppressed memories. Beloved is both the pain and the cure. As an embodiment of the repressed past, she acts as an unconscious evil spirit, stealing away the will of the characters, and as a psychoanalytic urge, she pries open suppressed memories and emotions. Countering

traumatic repression, she makes the characters accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved.

Beloved is the incarnation of Sethe's baby girl and of her most painful memory—the murder of her daughter to protect her children from slavery. Beloved is Sethe's "ghost", the return of her repressed past, and she forces Sethe to confront the gap between her motherly love and the realities of motherhood in slavery. But Beloved is also everyone's ghost, she functions as the spur to Paul D's and Denver's repressed pasts, forcing Paul D to confront the shame and pain of the powerlessness of a man in slavery, and enabling Denver to deal with her mothers history as a slave. Beloved initiates the individual healing processes of the three characters, which subsequently stimulate the formation of a family unit of love and support, in which the family members can provide for each other in ways that slavery denied them. And Beloved is the reader's ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers. Beloved catalyzes Sethe's memories as the novel Beloved catalyzes the reader's historical memories.

Beloved develops as a character, from a soft, voracious baby-woman to her final form as a beautiful pregnant woman. During the ritual in which she is exorcised the woman see her at last:

> The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (261)

Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future, pregnant with possibilities. In her last moments, Beloved stands as a contradictory, the beautiful African mother, connecting the mothers and daughters of African descent to their pre-slavery heritage and power, and as the all-consuming devil-child.

C. Sethe's Healing

Sethe's healing process is the focal point of the novel, as she gradually and painfully recollects the repressed past. Like Paul D's tobacco tin, Sethe's repressed past is like a rusted box closed inside of her. When she finally realizes that Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead baby, she feels as if she's found buried treasure:

> A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp as a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along. (176)

Beloved's resurrection exhumes the past Sethe has buried deep inside her. The treasure chest combines images of great discovery and wealth with images of death, the casket and the grave. As Amy Denver says, "'Anything dead coming back to life hurts'", and Sethe's attempts to prove her love to Beloved and gain Beloved's forgiveness nearly destroy Sethe.

Beloved is the murdered child, the repressed past, Sethe's own guilt and loss, and so Beloved can never forgive Sethe. But the former slave women understand the context within which Sethe acted; they shared in many of her miseries. And so her fellow sufferers come to her aid to exorcise the ghost of her past preying on her life, because Beloved is in some sense their ghost, too. Another focal woman, Ella, had also killed her child, although it was not out of love, and when she found out about Beloved's presence, "there was also something very personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present". (256) Ella brings the local women to Sethe's house to banish the ghost, and their chanting summons Sethe and Beloved from the house.

The exorcism of Beloved is a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleaning and rebirth, and a psychological clearing:

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the

> pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The other women's voices, sound without words, have the power of cleansing waters, bringing Sethe back to the Cleaning and to Baby Suggs' rituals during Sethe's brief period between slavery and the return of schoolteacher – of freedom. (95).

The author and reader, too, have gone through a ritual recovery of history and from history. Sethe's ritual and her memories are Morrison's story, a story that — like the voices of the women – reaches beyond meaning to the unconscious pains of the past. Morrison's story combines the creative and cleansing power of the women's voices surrounding Sethe, as well as the spiritual power of Baby Suggs and the disturbing power of Beloved, to construct the story as a ritual both healing and painful for the reader. Finally, Sethe's daughter Denver represents both the future and the past. Denver will be the new African American woman teacher, and she is Morrison's precursor, the woman who has taken on the task of carrying the story through the generation to our storyteller.

D. Denver Between Freedom and Slavery

Denver's favorite story is the story of her birth, in which Sethe bears her into a world between freedom and slavery. Born on the river that divides "free" and slave land in the midst of Sethe's flight from slavery, Denver is tore apart by the dual inheritance of freedom and slavery. When schoolteacher comes to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home as slaves, Denver drinks the blood of her murdered sister with her mother's milk, and she goes to jail with Sethe. A mirror image of her mother's repressed past, Denver goes deaf when she is asked about her time in prison. From then on Denver lives in seclusion, with only Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the baby ghost as companions. In her lonely withdrawal from the world, due in part to Sethe's isolation, Denver is as trapped by Sethe's past and Sethe's inability to find psychological freedom as Sethe herself is.

Denver's relation to the past is primarily historic rather than personal. Denver's personal stake in retrieving the past, like the reader's, involves a familial and ancestral inheritance, and her encounter with the past is "necessarily painful". Without knowledge of her mother's past, Denver must remain in isolation from history and from her position in the world that can only be understood through history.

Denver begins to experience the past through the stories she tells Beloved. When she repeats her birth story for Beloved, "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it -- through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked". (78) But Denver does not fully remember her past and her mother's past until she undergoes a "ritual of mergence" in part two of the novel.

Four chapters in the middle of part two form a ritual of mergence and possession for Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. These four chapters emerge from the minds of the three characters, who are left alone after Paul D is gone. Sethe has recognized Beloved as her baby girl and is submerged in her attempt to prove her love and atone of her murder, while Denver tries to stay inside the intense circle of possession Sethe and Beloved have created. In the first three chapters, Sethe first proclaims her possession of her daughter Beloved, then Denver of her sister Beloved, and then Beloved of her mother. The fourth chapter is in the form of a poetic chant, in which the memories and minds of the possession — "You are mine". (217) While Denver is possessed by the past she remembers everything – her own past and her mother's past, her fear of her mother as a child murderer, and her imaginary reunions with her father. The ritual of possession breaks through her isolation and grants Denver an experience of the past that can lead her into the future.

After the winter of possession, Denver decides she must leave the house to save her mother from madness and from the ravenous Beloved. In her last moment of fear as she reaches the door, Baby Suggs speaks to her. Baby Suggs' words conjure up the history of her family's struggle for survival and freedom, as well as her own defeat against the horrors of slavery. Denver silently asks Baby:

> 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)

Although Baby Suggs gave up struggling at the end of her life, her knowledge and spirit, and the knowledge of the past, make possible Denver's emergence into the world. With understanding comes the power to endure and to change.

Denver's position parallels the reader's in her historic relation to her mother's past.

But Denver also takes on another role by the end of the novel – that of the teacher, the historian, the author. Denver will become a schoolteacher, taking up the educational task from her teacher, Lady Jones, and Baby Suggs, and taking over the tools of literacy and education from the white schoolteacher. Paul D worries when he hears of her intentions to go to college, silently cautioning her: "Watch out. Nothing in this world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher."(266) But this is the very reason that Denver must usurp schoolteacher's position; she must take away from him the power to define African Americans and make their history in a way that steals their past, their souls, and their humanity.

Denver is Morrison's precursor, the historian with her roots in African American history and culture, who has a relationship with her ancestors. Sixo chooses another course, rejecting Halle's offer to be taught English, as Denver recalls:

> One of them with a number for a name said it would change his mind — make him forget things he shouldn't and he didn't want his mind messed up. But my daddy said, if you can't count they can cheat you. If you can't read they can beat you. (208)

While Halle discovers that the white man can cheat and beat you whether or not you are literate, Sixo keeps his cultural integrity and his oral tradition intact. But Denver, as a member of a different generation, must "know it and go on". With the knowledge of this cautionary tale, Denver points the way to a recovery of literacy, one that is suspicious of white definitions and discourse, and one that uses the African oral and cultural heritage and African American values to take over the task of African American history-making.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

"The writing of fiction inevitably addresses the material conditions, the cultural context and the psychological terms of its own production",[80] writes Michele Wallace, and nowhere is this more apparent that in Morrison's *Beloved*. After a self-imposed silence during the 1960s and early 1970s, when "race" was still deemed the over-riding question and black women kept their dissent to themselves, the Renaissance of African American woman writers burst through these limitations in full force, putting a gendered spin on the questions on "otherness" in a racist, patriarchal society. Though analyses of race, class and gender were always basic to Morrison's work right from the beginning, her emphasis on the black woman's voice and experience shifted the focus of African American literature from male confrontation with white society to a female concern with the welfare of her community. And that community has never been homogeneous nor perfect, a fact that has never interfered with the author's search for truth.

As in the case of the majority of black women writing in the 1990s, a central focus of Morrison's work is "her objective to determine her own black woman's paradigms, to rescue black American history from the clutches of the 'American destiny is white and male' approach of male historiography, and to rewrite it in terms of the black folk experience".[81] In order to achieve this she has reclaimed "the disremembered", given voice to the silent, re-created the stories to her tradition and re-worked the history of African American experience in the United States. This relationship between history, memory and story—and the tension created between the dominant and the silenced voice—are explored and re-explored throughout the novel *Beloved*.

In *Beloved*, Morrison wanted to explore the history of slavery from the personal, individual experience, to give voice to, black slaves who may have been liberated from bondage but were trapped in a past that they could not articulate. Denial became the means of survival, but it is a survival at the expense of wholeness; keeping the past at bay meant putting any thought of the future on hold. Memory is validated and becomes

instrumental in the reconstruction of a "disremembered history". The emphasis has a double edge to it: on the one hand, the black experience of slavery was not included in white historiography; on the other, "the white lie that black people did not have a memory was encouraged as part of the myth that black people and American Indians had lower mental capacities than other races".[82]

Several times, the narrator tells us "It was not a story to pass on". The last chapter presents a contradiction. Although Beloved's story, according to the narrator, is not a story to pass on, the novel performs exactly that action. For the characters of the novel, forgetting Beloved is a necessity. The past must be dealt with in a healthy way. Although traces of Beloved remind them of her from time to time, the dead remain dead, and the relationship between the characters and their past is allowed to become more manageable. For us, however, the story has to be passed on if we are to understand the history that is embodied in *Beloved.*

In the last chapter, the narrator tells us that Beloved is slowly forgotten, first by the people of the community, and then by the people of 124. For a time, strange events continue, but memories of the ghost begin to fade. There is not even a name to attach to her: "Every one knew what she was called but no one anywhere knew her name." They cannot remember what she said or if she said anything; they do not pass on her story.

The reader doesn't know what becomes of Beloved, whether she lives or dies, but can assumes hers is a tragic end. She is pregnant and deranged, naked and defenseless; little good is likely to befall her. However, at the metaphorical level, Beloved is gone because the past she represents has been confronted; by facing the past, Sethe is released into the present. Beloved disappears, having served her function of "rememory"; the sound and fury is over, and spiteful, loud 124 is finally quiet. Paul D may lay his story beside Sethe's. Beloved goes as she comes; the unaccountability of her whereabouts, her physical absence, constitutes the experience of loss at the heart of those ordinary unheralded lives silenced in history. Like Denver, the author "constructs out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved". (76)

Beloved is referred to as the forgotten, the unnamed. The novel is dedicated to "Sixty Million, and more"—the people who died during the transatlantic crossing. By capitalizing "Sixty" and "Million", Morrison is ascribing a title, a kind of name, to the often forgotten and anonymous first victims of the slave trade. The novel reminds us of

their suffering, and invites the reader to contend with the past and the legacy of slavery. The effects of slavery continue to this day, and, like the characters of the book, we must learn to understand the past if we are to deal with its effects on the present. Beloved is also our name, taken from the funeral service in which Sethe mistook the minister's words referring to the assembled mourners for the name of the dead. Beloved is a ghost of the past, but she is named for the audience at her funeral—an audience that includes, through the form of the novel, the readers of the book. Her name is ours; her legacy is one that we share and must confront.

If the task of the novel has been to lift the "veil behind the veil" that has been "disremembered and unaccounted for" and "deliberately forgot", it must also eventually draw the veil. (274) Morrison covers the exposed wound of the past with the repeated statement, "It was not a story to pass on". (275) The writer is careful to note at the end that in history or narrative, all cannot be accounted for; there remains that which remains unspoken, locked. The gaps and silences become quietly recriminating, refuting the possibility of any posthumous recompense that claims to be adequate to the past. In order to survive, people have to learn to forget. Forgetting is as important as remembering. But this forgetting is not an act of the unconscious.

In conclusion, the fact that slavery itself defies traditional historiography is at the heart of Morrison's project of historical reconstruction in *Beloved*. This basic assumption has led her to rewrite a period of African American history from the perspective of the formerly enslaved in order to explore historical traumas of slavery which can only be cured by being "re-memoried", imagined, and retold. *Beloved* is a critical revision of the past in which Morrison gives creative expression to aspects of experience ignored or downplayed in traditional white historiography. Consequently, the novel addresses the postmodern issue of the provisional nature of historical knowledge and the importance of historical reconstruction.

Notes

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[23] Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (New York: HBJ, 1989), p. 75.

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[34] Ibid., p.52-53.

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[50] Morrison, "Site of Memory", p.112.

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