

“To Part the Veil”:

Accessing Interiority in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2018



## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the culmination of a year spent immersing myself in Toni Morrison's writing, and several areas of related scholarship — but on a deeper level, it is the culmination of a passion for the humanities that began in high school. For that, I want to thank my English and history teachers at Convent of the Sacred Heart, even though they will probably never see this, for introducing me to the joys of interdisciplinary work.

I also want to thank several professors I have had over the past four years for encouraging me in my intellectual growth, even if they had little to do with this specific project: in particular, Dana Nichols, Aric Knuth, Jeremy Chamberlin, Adela Pinch, Kate Mendeloff, Jon Wells, Susan Juster, Howard Brick, and Anne Berg.

Special thanks go to:

Joey Gamble, the best GSI UofM has ever seen, who read this essay a week before it was due and miraculously managed to help me make it better without stressing me out.

Gillian White, whose warm support and philosophical ruminations allowed us to push ourselves as a cohort without getting lost in theory or line-editing, and the rest of my cohort for their edits, reading recommendations, encouragement and enthusiasm.

Aida Levy-Hussen, who luckily (for me) agreed to be my advisor on this project before she even arrived on campus. Every part of this essay — from the bibliography to the chapter structure to the writing itself — has benefited enormously from her thoughtful probings, astute analysis, and considerate editing.

My friends and housemates, who have listened ad nauseum to my musings and re-workings of ideas all year. I could not have done this without their love, laughter, and spontaneous trips for noodles.

My dad, for reading out loud to my brothers and me as kids before bedtime, reminding us daily of the power of a story, and my mom, for introducing me to some of the books that have fundamentally shaped my perspective — *Beloved* included.

Toni Morrison, for her brilliant work. I consider myself lucky to have spent this year engaging with it so deeply.

## Abstract

This thesis offers a reading of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's most influential novel, that highlights the author's formal and thematic investigations of interiority and access. By interiority, I mean the "inner lives" of slaves, private styles of communication among the black characters of the novel, and the insides of black domestic spaces. By access, I mean readers' access to understandings of these inner lives, white access to narratives of black pain, and the gendered and racialized access to both certain modes of communication and literal architectural structures. My interest in access to interiority is inspired in part by Morrison's own authorial framing of her novel, as she has described one of the central aims of *Beloved* as being a retrieval of the emotional experiences of slaves that have been lost to the historical record. I connect my examination of the novel to contemporary questions about whether and to what extent white Americans can understand and empathize with black narratives.

My first chapter focuses on how Morrison shifts between allowing or refusing access to the full story, (or what "really happened") and understanding through language. I examine specifically the telling / untelling of the infanticide, *Beloved*'s fragmented monologues, and the coda of the novel, emphasizing especially how the latter complicates and resists singular interpretations.

My second chapter explores bodily reclamations of the black protagonists, especially through an ability to recognize or understand embodied narratives. In other words, I trace how black characters are able to read each other's bodies — and voices — in ways mostly unintelligible or inaccessible to the whites, except in very specific cases that make the white characters uneasy when confronted with the humanity of the black people they are mistreating.

My final chapter argues that architecture is a subtle yet salient and pervasive metaphor through which Morrison intimates how slavery, beyond violating bodily interiors and poisoning language, also rendered traditional American concepts of domestic safety inconsequential for the black people forced to endure it. I examine how architectural language signifies and characterizes the retrieval of (often traumatic) memories, how access to spaces in the novel is affected by a gendered logic, and how and why the healing rituals of the novel take place outside of those architectural structures.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, white accessibility to black interiority, embodiment, literacy of embodied narratives, "hieroglyphics of the flesh," "American grammar," intergenerational trauma, "rememory"

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## Introduction

Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till, "Open Casket," was displayed in the Whitney Museum of Art Biennial, and sparked a heated controversy in the summer of 2017. The range of critical pieces that it inspired, exploring the racial politics of its content, production, and display, almost always included or were highly based on discussions of Dana Schutz's status as a white woman profiting from an image of a mutilated black body. In the July 2017 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Zadie Smith responded to both the painting and a popular, widely circulated letter that called for its removal — and ultimately, its destruction. Smith reflects on the politics and implications of an artist's claim to a narrative that crosses racial lines, writing

There is an argument that there are many things that are "ours" and must not be touched or even looked at sideways, including (but not limited to) our voices...our hair... our history, and... our pain. A people from whom so much has been stolen are understandably protective of their possessions, especially the ineffable kind. (86)

Though true, it would be simplistic to say that the "Open Casket" controversy was solely one flashpoint of many in a summer marked by racial unrest increasingly reported on by the media. As Smith points out, the passionate reactions to the painting reveal the deeper contemporary American struggle to understand and control how historical narratives of racial oppression in America are constructed, circulated, and consumed.

Smith is dealing fundamentally with the question of accessibility — primarily white accessibility to black American pain, and contemporary access to those historical experiences and narratives, simultaneously intensely personal and viscerally public. She considers who can claim to tell the story of Emmett Till, and where, how, why — and to a certain extent, if — that story should or can be made accessible to white people in particular. She notes that the painting "is an abstraction without much intensity, and there's a clear caution in the brushstrokes around the eyes: Schutz has gone in only so far," (89) perceiving that Schutz herself recognizes a level

beyond which she cannot go, an internal censor that consciously or subconsciously reaffirms social prescriptions and proscriptions on whether, and how, to look across lines of racial difference — a moral impulse that might clash with the artistic compulsion. What Schutz seems to be struggling with, as Smith recognizes, is whether white Americans can understand or empathize with black experience, and how to confront the trauma that white America has inflicted on others. Protestors were flagging the assumption of entitlement to those narratives, seeing the painting as yet another appropriation of black pain. The extent to which the perspectives and details of an historical narrative are accessible is informed by the narrative's medium, the infrastructures within which it circulates, and the capacity, utility, and ethics of empathy. Smith sutures together these issues by arguing, "This is always a risk in art. The solution remains as it has always been. Get out (of the gallery) or go deeper in (to the argument)," (89) purposefully collapsing the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical.

These long-standing debates about cross racial accessibility are rapidly being recontextualized by our tumultuous political climate and the potential of any piece of media that strikes a chord, resonant or discordant, to go instantly viral, becoming nationwide dinner table conversation within minutes. The backdrop against which the "Open Casket" controversy occurred was peppered with arguments over what to do with American infrastructures or symbols that bear the residue of racial history (such as Confederate statues), increased debates over reparations, and other questions steeped in what is called, often derisively, "identity politics." America has reached a breaking point in what literary critic Shoshana Felman might call the testimonial crisis, regarding its own history of violent racial oppression.

How can Americans — as consumers of art and media, as witnesses, as scholars — understand the history of slavery, a history so fundamental to our nation's origins and identity

yet one whose documentary trail leaves absences so gaping — in written and unwritten records, in archives, in canons — that we will never be able to truly comprehend how wide they are? To what degree can full understanding be achieved, speaking or writing across race and across time? To what extent is empathy possible across these barriers — and how might it fall short (as “Open Casket” appeared to) in helping us bear witness to not only historical trauma but its lingering effects? In *The Fall*, Felman asks, “the question for contemporary testimonial narrative is, then, how can it bridge, speak over, the collapse of bridges, and yet, narrate at the same time the process and event of the collapse?” (201), which leads me to also ask: what does exploring these questions through literature reveal to us that we might otherwise not be able to see?

Revisiting Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and the “paradigmatic text” that, as Stephen Best has argued, shaped an entire generation of scholars’ conception of their “ethical relationship to the past” and “moved an entire field of literary studies to a central place in African American studies” (459) — can help us explore and understand the stakes of these questions as well as their contemporary recontextualization, articulated by scholars like Smith. While an editor for *The Black Book*, a collection of black American memorabilia from the 19th and 20th centuries that Morrison saw as a “corrective to much of the rhetoric of the radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement, which she feared was disrespectful of the lived experiences of many who survived slavery,” she encountered a newspaper clipping that acquainted her with Margaret Garner (Andrews 6). Almost two decades later, Morrison took Garner’s story — that of a runaway slave who, upon facing capture, opted to try to kill her children rather than let them be subjected to life under slavery — and began to adapt it into the book that would become *Beloved*.

The novel's cultural importance has been meticulously documented by scholars in several fields. The wealth of interpretative work that has been done on *Beloved* is due to not only the significance of its historical material and its nuanced relationship to several canonical traditions, but also to how, as Heather Love notes,

*Beloved* has generally been understood as the richest of literary productions, both because of the complexity, density, and lyricism of its language and because of its moving account of the interiority of the disenfranchised. The literary and ethical significance of *Beloved* is amplified because, responding to the violent erasures of the archive and to racist science that denied full human subjectivity to blacks, Morrison imagines the motivations, desires, sensations, and feelings of individuals who were meant to have none. (383)

Yet if, on the one hand, *Beloved* is dedicated to the recuperation of that which has been ignored in or lost to history, it is also consumed with the limits of language. The text navigates a persistent tension between ineffable stories of personal trauma under slavery and the limits of language to tell the story of slavery itself: a narrative for which, as scholars have argued, language has little to no capacity. How to bear witness to a largely unwritten, unspoken, unrecorded past is a question woven throughout the entire work. *Beloved*, “on behalf of millions, give(s) voice to a profound lament: the absence of a historical marker to remind us never to let this atrocity to happen again. For its absence has neither erased nor diminished its pain; rather, it reminds us only of itself: of what is missing” (Andrews 3).

Morrison reproduces her own frustrated access to this slippery, unreachable past by troubling access for her characters and readers through both plot and narrative form, in a story that also reveals how trauma prevents people from articulating the memories of their experiences — especially in a system of language that has historically been used to ignore, misrepresent, and gloss over the narratives of American slavery. This thesis focuses on how Morrison manipulates the access of readers and characters to linguistic, bodily, and architectural interiorities within

*Beloved*. It also explores how the difficulty in obtaining or deliberate withholding of access reflects the linguistic and empathetic difficulties in telling the story that, to borrow from poet M. NourbeSe Philip, paradoxically “cannot be told but must be told” (Philip 198).

Shifting between the antebellum past and the postbellum narrative present (to put it simply), *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a slave woman and mother who runs away from Sweet Home plantation while pregnant, sending her other children ahead of her. Upon making it to Ohio and the house of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, Sethe begins to recuperate, only to be pursued by the overseer who brutalized her at Sweet Home. Backed into a corner — literally and metaphorically — Sethe attempts to kill her children rather than let them be recaptured into slavery. With one of them, she succeeds. The novel opens 18 years later, describing 124, the house in which Sethe and her daughter Denver live with the “spiteful” baby ghost of the daughter she killed. The ghost has scared away Sethe’s two boys from the house, but Sethe and Denver live in a tenuous peace with it. When Paul D, another former slave from Sweet Home and friend of Sethe’s, walks back into her life and house, 124’s uneasy equilibrium erupts, and the ghostly presence is temporarily banished. Not for long, though, as Sethe, Paul D, and Denver soon happen upon a young woman who can barely talk or function like an adult. She spells out her name, B-e-l-o-v-e-d — the word Sethe had put on the tombstone of her baby — and she is swiftly absorbed into 124.

Upon moving into the house in human form, *Beloved*’s behavior grows stranger; she asks Sethe for stories she has no way of knowing about, she hums a song that was privately shared between Sethe and her children, and she begins to push Paul D out of the house through a power he is unable to understand or articulate. As *Beloved* grows stronger, Denver and eventually Sethe recognize her as the baby ghost returned. Paul D, upon learning through a newspaper clipping

what Sethe had done to merit jail time (and the community's ostracization) and unable to fathom her choice, leaves. Sethe, disappointed but resolute, locks her door against the world and grows increasingly consumed by and with her newly returned daughter. Once some of the community women learn about the strange goings-on at 124, after seeing Denver struggle to support the household, they recognize Beloved as a haunted and haunting embodiment of the past, and successfully exorcise her from the house. She disappears, and is eventually forgotten.

My first chapter focuses on how Morrison allows or frustrates access, understanding, and interpretation of narratives through language. To explore how the trauma of slavery exposes the limitations of the speaker and of language itself — and how *Beloved's* epitomization of this limit experience is what makes it truly a paradigmatic text — I use the work of Hortense Spillers, M. NourbeSe Philip's Notanda from *Zong*, and Marianne Hirsch's "Maternity and Rememory." This chapter focuses primarily on the circulation of the story of the infanticide, the fragmented monologues in the last third of the novel, and the coda. Regarding the coda, I argue that Morrison's repetition and subtle changes of "this is not a story to pass on," which has been used as the fulcrum on which many scholarly interpretations of Morrison's argument about remembering the past turn, open up several avenues to interpretation.

My second chapter investigates how bodies are read and rendered throughout the novel. A central theme of *Beloved* is how the black body — and the flesh, to borrow from Hortense Spillers' distinction of the two — is described by a system of language that can't or willfully isn't used to fully express the trauma slavery has caused. I discuss how this troubles characters' articulations of their pain in my first chapter; in my second, I argue that the text portrays varying and inconstant levels of access to the literacy that allows characters to "read" a body, or a body's memories, as the body is not only the site of physical and sexual trauma but simultaneously

holds the memory of it. This literacy is passed down generationally, is often gendered, and is in direct opposition to the systems of language used by white characters such as Schoolteacher to define these same bodies. In other words, I examine how “the eruption of the body is the confrontation between language and history — the stage, the vehicle, the part, and the thing itself” (Pinto 197). I discuss the descriptions of Sethe’s back and mouth, Sethe’s mother’s body, Beloved’s own scar, and the “wildness” that being forced to wear a bit in one’s mouth can put in a person’s eyes. I also examine the hidden or reclaimed meanings of sound, as the body is also the container and conveyer of the voice — notable as the novel moves beyond the concept of the word “made flesh” to the word made audible.

My third chapter argues that slavery’s infiltration into every domain of life pushes the black protagonists to carve out their own spaces of interiority (literally and metaphorically) to avoid the dangers that come from inhabiting those defined by white people. That is, I argue literal architectural boundaries and thresholds function differently for the black protagonists in the novel, in that traditional American conceptions of safety and domesticity don’t hold the same weight for the black characters as they do for the whites. I trace how accessibility to narratives is figured through architectural language and spatial metaphors, particularly in relation to the novel’s two main architectural structures: the hold of the slave ship and 124 itself. This chapter primarily examines how Sethe’s trauma is embodied in the house before it’s made flesh in Beloved, how this embodiment isolates 124 from the community, and how it affects the men’s access to the house and its narratives. I also discuss the moments of healing that take place outside of 124: Baby Suggs’ sermon in the clearing and the exorcism of Beloved conducted by the community women.

Morrison's representations of access or the lack thereof to these various interiorities relate to not only the question of how to tell the story that can't be told but must be told, but also to a third limitation: that of the reader's capacity for judgment or full comprehension. Now especially, Morrison's work forces us to question whether understanding a story might not be the necessary model for empathy or compassion, and how the space that literature opens up for empathy has boundaries and limits too. This question hits a startling and chilling pitch particularly for white readers — including myself — when the text assumes the perspective of a white slave catcher and uses the pronoun “you” to explain how to go about hunting down an escaped slave: “...likely as not the fugitive would make a dash for it. Although sometimes, you could never tell, you'd find them folded up tight somewhere: beneath floorboards, in a pantry... even then care was taken, because the quietest ones, the ones you pulled from a press, a hayloft, or that once, from a chimney, would go along nicely for two or three seconds” (174).

*Beloved* takes a true account of which we know only the vague contours, and confronts readers with a fleshed-out, visceral version of it. The novel simultaneously allows readers to imagine certain details of what the inner lives of these black characters might have looked like, while also, at times, withholding certain understanding from us. The novel forces us to reflect on our own largely incomplete knowledge of that story, and in doing so, compels us to consider how literature might help us find answers to these questions, essential in so many ways to the contemporary struggle of remembering, representing, and reckoning with the past.

## Chapter 1

### The Story that “Cannot Be Told But Must be Told”: On the Limits of Linguistic

#### Inaccessibility

In the quest to communicate a narrative, language itself is simultaneously the author’s essential instrument and “a limit that can be played with, recycled, reordered, but not altogether side-stepped or abolished” (Pinto 176). In *Beloved*, Morrison exploits language’s limitations in a multitude of ways, from making certain key passages disjointed and difficult to understand, to leaving open a multiplicity of interpretations for others.

In “The Site of Memory,” an essay in which Morrison recounts her process for writing *Beloved*, the author describes her self-appointed task of figuring out “how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’ ...Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. ... But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me” (Morrison 71). Writing *Beloved* became an exercise in trying to imagine and communicate the inner lives of slaves, from which we are barred from ever having full access, in part because those narratives have been largely unrecorded. She also notes that the conventions of the time period prevented slaves and escaped slaves from describing their emotional experiences in detail or depth, meaning that even the records to which we do have access confront us with limitations.

And yet, though the writing in *Beloved* is exquisite and heartbreaking in its renderings of vulnerability, trauma, and healing — revealing Morrison’s thoughtful imaginative work — the text itself withholds access to several levels of interiority even beyond those that come from history’s holding us at a distance. That is to say, the veil is never completely pulled down or moved aside. The private thoughts and feelings of certain characters — and even details of

certain stories themselves — are withheld from us and from characters within the novel. Reading *Beloved* is an exercise in recognizing and confronting the limits of language, most visible in the circulation of the story of Sethe's infanticide, the fragmented monologues of Beloved, and the coda.

The plot of *Beloved* hinges on Sethe's decision to try to kill her children rather than risk their re-enslavement. This act — and her partial success — sends Sethe to jail, Baby Suggs to her bed, and Paul D on his way, and provides the protective framework from which Sethe parents Denver. Yet, as Marianne Hirsch points out in "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," though the story of infanticide is circulated throughout the text, it is for the most part not verbalized; it is circumvented and literally circled around, in the most significant and intricate way inaccessibility manifests linguistically in *Beloved*.

That Sethe's baby's throat was cut is revealed within the first four pages. Though the reader may begin to suspect that Sethe herself had done it, the details of the narrative are withheld for the majority of the first half of the novel. The reader is not provided access to a straightforward telling of this event until page 175, when it is told from the point of view of the men who come to capture Sethe. Their account, as Heather Love explains, is lacking in "psychological depth and linguistic richness" (Love 384). It reads as a deliberate sequence of events, positioned in order. Documentary in nature, it's stripped of the linguistic circumvention that marks the telling of the story throughout the rest of the novel:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere— in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at — the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of the mother's swing. (Morrison 175)

That the clearest telling of the story requires language devoid of nuance, names, and a desire to understand reflects an implicit bias in American English itself: certain stories aren't expressible in it. The language of the slave catchers approximates what Hortense Spillers calls an "American grammar," concealing the history of black "captivity and mutilation" in the sanitized order of the "ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation" (Spillers 63).

The language used in this scene, reflective of Spillers' "American grammar," erases by its nature the humanity of the black people involved. It's fluid between the omniscient narrator and the white men with power, as Love notes; the narrator's perspective and that of the slave catcher feel nearly inextricable (Love 385). Morrison takes this "American grammar," the only linguistic mode that gives us access to "what happened," and pares it down to show us that even this version cloaks just as much as it purports to reveal.

The interiority of the story — the perspectives of the black people involved, the intent behind Sethe's actions, and her subsequent emotions and thoughts — is absent here, reflected in the next sentence: "Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim" (175). He views Sethe and her children as property, which we already know and might take for granted as contemporary readers; indeed, it is for destruction of property that Sethe is imprisoned. But this dehumanization is registered not only through the legal or economic claim, but the claim of the language. Schoolteacher doesn't attempt to understand the story behind what is happening in front of him; he sees no narrative to claim. That there is no longer an economically productive reason for him to pursue Sethe or her children is enough for him; he has no need to try to push further into the shed or the story. Schoolteacher's belief there is nothing to "claim" is indirectly juxtaposed against Paul D's realization upon absorbing what Sethe has done: "Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than

what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him” (193). It is Sethe’s claim to the narrative that she had done what she did out of love — a human conviction inexpressible and unintelligible in the language of schoolteacher, the slave catcher and the sheriff — that Paul D notes is the most dangerous element to her tale. This reflects his belief that her love is “too thick”; the kind of love that could get a slave (or even a former slave) into trouble (Morrison 193).

The “Notanda” to M. NourbeSe Philip’s volume of poetry, *Zong!*, provides a sensitive framework for understanding how language in *Beloved* fails to convey the story of the infanticide. By Philip’s logic, the story cannot be fully told except through its own un-telling. In writing poetry about a group of slaves thrown overboard the slave ship *Zong*, using only the language of the transcript from an ensuing court case, Philip explains that her intent was to

use the text of the legal decision as a word store: to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text, I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*. But this is a story that can only be told by not telling. (191)

Her spatial conception of the “word store” reflects her assertion that language doesn’t necessarily hold the infinite possibility we might think it does: “we believe we have the freedom to choose any words we want to work with from the universe of words, but so much of what we work with is a given” (192). Her exercise reveals that the court cases don’t actually communicate what happened to the black human beings aboard that ship. The text itself bars access to that story; it is not a record of a murder trial, but rather a legal settlement over an insurance dispute (mirrored in how Sethe is incarcerated not for murder, but for destruction of property.) Philip writes “The disorder, illogic, and irrationality of the *Zong!* Poems can no more tell the story than the legal

report of Gregson vs. Gilbert masquerading as order, logic, and rationality. In their very disorder and illogic is the not-telling of the story that must be told” (197). Similarly, the description of the infanticide offered in the documentary passage of *Beloved* — which doesn’t even include arguably the most visceral image, Sethe’s taking a saw to her baby’s throat — cannot truly tell that story.

While Love’s argument that this version of the story is just as worthy of analysis is strong, I would argue against her framing of other versions as an “inside view” (Love 384). Though the reader is given access to some of Sethe’s private thoughts and feelings about what she had done, often couched in euphemism, she never truly articulates this “inside view” herself, especially to other people. Stamp Paid uses a newspaper clipping to tell Paul D, and when Paul D confronts Sethe with it, Sethe knows right away 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” (192). By referencing tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells, Sethe rejects Paul D’s articulations of her own mental and emotional interiority, some of which had softened her heart earlier in the novel. She expects him to be able to understand the story’s untelling; because he can’t, and doesn’t empathize with her decision, she retracts a level of communication from him. When he says “you got two feet, Sethe, not four,” (194) he is verbalizing the “master’s language” of schoolteacher’s ledger — in which he had split up the “human” and “animal” characteristics of Sethe on opposite sides of the page — instantly widening the distance between them.

The text's critique of who can claim an authority and platform to tell certain narratives also reflects the limitations of language to contain and convey the meaning of experience. When Stamp Paid indirectly communicates the infanticide through a newspaper clipping to Paul D, Paul D doesn't focus on the text. He insists the story cannot be about Sethe because he knows her mouth, and the mouth in the clipping isn't hers:

The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No. At the mouth, you see. And no to whatever it was Stamp Paid wanted him to know. 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. ... (183)

Paul D refuses to trust the language of a platform that has historically never given depth or empathy to any story of a black person — and to which access had been barred, as many slaves couldn't read. His capitulation to it later reflects just how ingrained its power to confer reality is.

It is worth noting that Morrison describes her job as “ripping down a veil” that hangs between the reader and the interiority of slaves' lives — and when Sethe is confronted by Schoolteacher, she “collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe” (193). Whether or not this repetition of the veil in her imaginative work is intentional on Morrison's part, it reveals a certain level past which perhaps even she cannot go; all she can do is make us acutely aware of the presence of that veil.

The story of the infanticide never fully congeals into a comprehensive account made accessible or articulable to anyone; bits and pieces of it are scattered throughout the novel, marking another rhetorical maneuver that makes understanding difficult for the reader. By contrast, the final third of the novel includes a more tightly contained, localized collection of monologues narrated by Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Sethe's and Denver's monologues are

straightforward, often bluntly confirming facts the reader already knows; this shift in narrative form additionally allows the reader slightly more intimate access to their thoughts and feelings. Sethe's monologue reveals her relief that, now that she knows who Beloved truly is, she doesn't have to explain anything, because Beloved already knows. Denver's monologue reveals her struggle with loving her mother and wanting to protect her sister.

Beloved's monologue, however, resists and retracts this access, marking the linguistic climax of the novel. Here, the narrative unravels. Language cannot bear the weight of Beloved's story. These five pages are comprised of sentence fragments with missing or vague antecedents, repeated phrases, an unclear timeline or location of events, and no punctuation — except, intriguingly, for the period at the end of the first sentence. It reads like a stream of consciousness unmediated by grammatical rules, even as the text includes spaces to indicate where one thought ends and the next begins — or perhaps the spaces of absence that Beloved cannot find the language to fill. The opening paragraph of this monologue reveals Beloved's frustration with her inability to articulate her story:

I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them  
in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the  
grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are  
pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where i stop her face is my  
own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too  
a hot thing (249)

Most scholars agree the story Beloved recounts is not just her own, but one of the collective trauma endured by slaves during the Middle Passage, which she, if she were only Sethe's dead daughter, would have no way of knowing about. Here, Beloved is giving voice to the "60 million and more" of the novel's dedication. Jean Wyatt notes that

Since Morrison does not identify these scattered perceptions as observations of life on a slave ship or tell how Beloved came to be there or give any coordinates of time and place, readers are baffled: they have no idea where they are. ... The fragmented syntax and

absence of punctuation robs the reader of known demarcations, creating a linguistic equivalent of the Africans loss of differentiation in an ‘oceanic’ space that ‘unmade’ cultural identities and erased even the lines between male and female, living and dead. (480)

By immersing the reader in this oceanic language, Morrison deliberately withholds their access to understanding even as she opens up multiple areas of interpretation. The monologue reflects both M. Nourbese Philip’s frustration with the limits of her “word store,” and Morrison’s own note in her introduction that she wanted readers upon opening the novel, “to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population — just as the characters were snatched from one place to another...without preparation or defense” (xix).

This fragmented monologue is followed by the same monologue in a narrative form that more closely matches Sethe’s and Denver’s monologues. It reads as if Beloved has grown up and has been granted access to the conventions of language: “I am Beloved and she is mine. Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where we sleep. She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea” (253). The more structured narrative form gives some measure more of insight, yet it still withholds understanding of both Beloved’s story and the more comprehensive one at which it hints.

After her monologue ends, the following two pages read as a conversation among Beloved, Sethe, and Denver. Like Beloved’s fragmented monologue, this conversation does not demarcate who is speaking or when; the reader must use context clues to figure it out, and even with careful tracing, it is impossible to always be certain of who is speaking. Just as Stamp Paid marks the women’s voices as being indistinguishable from each other when he catches snippets

of their “unspeakable thoughts,” (235) they become indivisible from each other. This conversation hauntingly closes with the following, leaving who is claiming whom completely up to interpretation:

You are mine  
 You are mine  
 You are mine (256)

The multiplicity of interpretations this repetition offers foreshadows one of the most circulated, dissected, and referenced excerpts of Morrison’s work: *Beloved*’s coda, about a page and a half of text. Unlike previously discussed passages in which Morrison both withholds understanding from us and opens up interpretive possibilities, the coda to *Beloved* does not rely on the fragmentation of either sentences or the story to trouble a reader’s comprehension. It resists a singular interpretation just as much as the rest of the novel, if not more.

On the most literal level, the coda can be read as concluding the story of Beloved, the woman, after her exorcism from 124:

Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? ... In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

Morrison obfuscates the antecedents to her pronouns, making this part of the text and its meaning difficult to access. Though the word “Beloved” is used later in the passage, it is not used as an antecedent to “she,” or to “the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame,” the two most deliberate references to the woman Beloved. The passage then discusses those whose lives she had ruptured:

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn’t remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to

believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all.

Here again, though the text refers to Beloved's exorcism from the house, the antecedent to "they" is unclear. Sethe, Denver, Paul D, Ella, Stamp Paid — none of these characters are mentioned by name. This deliberate lack of clarity resists the singular interpretation of the coda as solely a wrap-up on the characters of *Beloved*. It mirrors the multiplicity of the character Beloved on the slave ship, and allows us to read metaphorically, plugging in what we think Beloved symbolizes, and what the method of forgetting of her the coda recommends.

Interpretations of the coda hinge especially on the phrase "This is not a story to pass on." Some scholars read it as a warning against the consequences of retransmitting this story, based on the immense trauma embodied in it; in other words, the "passing on" of this story would be a dangerously melancholic act. Others read "pass on" as a warning against not telling it, or not allowing it to take up the space it needs. Yet a close reading of the phrase itself, and its three distinct places within the coda, opens up the possibility that these interpretations need not be mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed.

The first two times the phrase is used, it is worded, "It was not a story to pass on." It comes after the paragraphs about Beloved and the people who knew her, respectively. The third time the phrase is used, there is a subtle shift in both the antecedent and the verb tense; the phrase changes to, "This is not a story to pass on." The lack of a clear antecedent in this iteration is highlighted by the journey from "it" to "this." The text leaves unclear not only what it means for a story to not be passed on, but which story is in question in the first place: that of Beloved the woman, and all that she might be said to represent, or that of *Beloved* itself (thrown into even sharper relief as the last line of the novel is also "Beloved.") Through the abruptness of the verb tense shift, Morrison may be attempting to ferry readers into a more present mindset as the novel

ends, leaving them wondering how to go on from there, now holding this story inside of them. Incidentally, this call for the reader to pay attention to his or her own material present bears a striking resemblance to the final line of *Jazz*, the next novel in this trilogy, which is “Look where your hands are. Now” (265).

The shift in both antecedents and verb tense opens up the possibility that the narrative referenced in the first two phrases is different from that of the final repetition. The passage in between the second and third repetitions of the phrase holds the coda’s first reference to a future beyond the novel’s ending: “Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but they don’t because they know things will never be the same if they do” (323). It is possible that the first two times the phrase is used, it refers to *Beloved* the woman — and the final time, it refers to *Beloved* the novel.

The focus on the accessibility, or lack thereof, to articulating or understanding experiences of the past in *Beloved* and its related scholarship is inextricable from the study of Sethe’s use of “rememory” when referring to traumatic experiences. In “Maternity and Rememory,” Marianne Hirsch writes that rememory is “Morrison’s attempt to re-conceive the memory of slavery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so differently, what an entire culture has been trying to repress” (96). In other words, in the novel, rememory is “...repetition + memory, not simply a recollection of the past but its return, its re-presentation, its re-incarnation, and thereby the re-vision of memory itself. Through the rememory of *Beloved*, the past again becomes present but its presence does not re-engulf, it does not kill” (Hirsch 107). Similarly, Caroline Rody argues that, “For Sethe as for her author, then, to “rememory” is to use one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past” (101).

While both of these clear and useful interpretations allow us to delve into the meaning of rememory, neither fully capture the work that it does for Sethe, Morrison and the reader. When Sethe first discusses rememory, she is explaining to Denver how it is difficult for her to believe in time; some things are forgotten and some things never are, but “Places, places are still there. 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” (47). When Denver asks if other people can see her rememory, Sethe answers in the affirmative, saying, “Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up....But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (43). But Sethe also uses rememory as a verb. She says to Beloved — or thinks, more accurately, as “says” implies a spoken quality that is self-referentially absent here — “Thank god I don’t have to rememory or say anything because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you. Never. It was all I could think of to do” (226). She is talking about her own history on and escape from Sweet Home plantation, but also the story of the infanticide, which she believes only Beloved could ever fully understand.

Thus “rememory” is the word Sethe gives to the attempt to articulate and communicate experiences that feel inexpressible, both by their traumatic nature and by the limits of language itself. Rememory is both the story that “cannot be told but must be told” and the act of trying to tell it. “Bumping into” someone else’s rememory is Sethe’s understanding of the invitation into someone else’s untellable story. It is not able to be fully accessed through understanding, entered into, or absorbed, but it can be seen, heard, and felt. This understanding is backed up by how other characters circulate Sethe’s own trauma regarding killing her daughter. Neither Denver nor Paul D can ever fully gain entry into it. Yet, if Beloved herself represents Sethe’s own untellable

story, they are able to see, hear, and feel her. Baby Suggs alone can understand it, but the emotional toll this understanding takes on her is what eventually breaks her, as “she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (214). Through its fluid uses and interpretations, the word “rememory” itself represents the condensation of the linguistic maneuvers Sethe uses in her struggle to communicate against a system that constantly proves inadequate to her needs, and reflects the way language itself functions throughout the novel.

## Chapter 2

### Reading Embodied Narratives

After examining how the language of *Beloved* bars or invites access to or understanding of the full story of traumatic memories, I turn to how the body is rendered and read throughout it. As an institution and practice, slavery rendered literal bodily interiority violable to the whims of a white master or mistress. This held especially brutal implications for black women, who, as Hortense Spillers has painstakingly noted, experienced subjugation through not only targeted sexual violence but also the same physical expectations and punishments that scholars might normally associate more with male narratives, reflecting what she calls the ungendering of the female body in this context.<sup>1</sup> *Beloved* includes several accounts of physical and sexual trauma endured by many of the black characters in the novel, revealed in varying levels of bluntness or euphemism. Thus much of the scholarship done on bodies in *Beloved* focuses on the physical/sexual trauma of slavery, motherhood, and/or on what *Beloved* herself embodies. And yet, in ways that echo antebellum slave narratives, *Beloved* also demonstrates how bodies bear narratives; i.e., how the bodily expressions of black protagonists are unintelligible to whites, or rewrite meanings that white people have ascribed to certain acts. Only some possess the specialized literacy that allows them to decipher the trauma inscribed on black bodies.

Those who see the scars on Sethe's back from being beaten while pregnant — Paul D and Amy Denver, specifically — “read” them out loud to her. When Paul D sees Sethe's back, he

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<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note here the work done by scholars such as Franny Nudelman, who have studied how even in the narratives penned by female slaves that we do have access to, there is a traceable pattern of euphemism or innuendo used to talk about sexual violence to which they were subjected. They would have felt constrained by the social mores at the time that barred such frank stories from public discussion or consumption. Incidentally, this is mirrored in a slave woman's explanation to Sethe as a child that while her mother had been raped by white crew members on a ship, Sethe's father had not raped her. Nan communicates this to Sethe by saying, “She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arm around” (Morrison 74).

sees a “sculpture...like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display” (21). Amy Denver says, “It’s a tree... A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk — it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. ... Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder” (93). Sethe cannot see her own back, nor even feel it, as the skin has been deadened by the trauma inflicted on it. She chooses to believe and repeat Amy’s version, rather than Paul D’s, as it represents a kind of ongoingness of life (and, as I have mentioned earlier, she actually rejects Paul D’s readings of her body when she sees he is unable to understand her). More notably, Baby Suggs and Ella don’t give Sethe any kind of euphemistic language to describe these scars, like Paul D and Amy do; they help her heal from the wounds, but refuse to coat them with inadequate language.

Often, it is the women who have lived and navigated motherhood under slavery that have an unspoken and undescribed ability to understand a body’s narratives, largely barred to the black men and the white characters in the novel. They learn how to read each other’s bodies through experiencing similar trauma. This kind of literacy is often understood as passed on from grandmother to mother to daughter: “Morrison’s women are linked by a three-generation chain of scars, marking both bond and breach: Sethe’s mother urges her daughter to recognize her body in death by the scar under her breast, and Sethe’s resurrected daughter bears on her neck the mark of her mother’s handsaw” (Rody 107)

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammarbook,” Spillers, when talking about the physical marks that brutality against slaves left, notes that “These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (61). That is, indicators of the physical trauma of black bodies were rendered invisible to white eyes because of the

automatic dehumanization of the white gaze. However, in *Beloved*, the black characters reassign meanings to these hieroglyphics. Sethe tells Denver about her own mother's markings, giving another example of literal bodily scars representing something to be defined, manipulated or repurposed:

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' (73)

By showing her daughter, in private, the mark that branded her as a slave, Sethe's mother "transformed a mark of mutilation, a sign of diminished humanity, into a sign of recognition and humanity" (Henderson 95), thereby rewriting "the slave owner's own inscription as her own subversive maternal language" (Hirsch 98). By indicating Sethe might not be able to see or recognize her face sometime in the future, she's also hinting at a kind of physical cruelty that small Sethe might not have witnessed yet. Right after this display, however, Sethe's mother leaves a different imprint on her daughter: a slap, after Sethe asks her for the same mark. Sethe wants a mark to be known by, something to tie her to her mother; she does not yet have the kind of bodily literacy that her mother did. It comes in part from enduring motherhood under slavery, though this goes beyond only implications about wisdom gained or pain endured through birthing a child under conditions that render familial ties meaningless under the law: "Sethe's body, the birthing maternal body, is marked by the narrative of slavery, just as her own mother's body was marked by a circle and cross under her breast. In this novel, the mother's body is not merely a vehicle for the child's birth and creation; it has a narrative of its own" (Hirsch 102). Sethe's scars, her mother's branding, the trace of her mother's slap, her own body after childbirth: all of these are bodily narratives and memories she understands retrospectively.

The focus on bodies' markings and the narratives they house uniquely manifests in understandings of Beloved's body. She is described as having flawless skin except for "three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under her hat" (62). More important are the descriptions of the scar under her chin from her mother's hand saw — descriptions that often reveal the same kind of linguistic circumlocution that characterizes descriptions of the action that caused it. Denver, the first to see it, guesses what it is: "Denver saw the tip of the thing she always saw in its entirety when Beloved undressed to sleep. Looking straight at it she whispered, 'Why do you call yourself Beloved?'" (88) Once Sethe sees the scar — "the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy coo place under her chin" (282) — she and Beloved begin to push Denver out of their relationship. In other words, Sethe's reading of that scar, which requires no verbal communication, marks a kind of turning point in the narrative of Beloved's body, and her own relationship to it. Sethe's recognizing the mark for what it is begins their rapid unraveling into each other.

The understanding of Beloved's body goes beyond the kind of physical markings that indicate how reminders of slavery were etched onto these bodies. Before the description of Beloved's three vertical scratches, and the circumlocution around the scar on her neck, she is described as having no lines on her hands. When Denver goes to the Bodwins (the white family that had helped Baby Suggs years ago) and talks to Janey, the black woman currently taking care of them, about working, Denver vaguely explains that another woman in the house is taking up Sethe's time and energy. Janey says, "Tell me, this here woman in your house. The cousin. She got any lines on her hands?" (299) Denver says no, and upon hearing this, Janey understands that Beloved is not solely human, saying only, "I guess there's a God after all" (299). The repetitive

focus on Beloved's skin having faint scars, but no lines, reflects how different members of the community (again, mostly women) are able to read not just what's on her body, but what isn't — the same way that Ella, when listening to a slave's story, listens not just for what they say but for the "holes" in the story: "the things fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned things people left behind" (108).

The ability to read black bodies in *Beloved*, and the reassignment of meaning to some of the markings they hold, is condensed and pushed even further in the text's subtle focus on eyes and eye contact. Although the cliché of eyes being "the windows of the soul" might feel jarring in an analysis of a work like *Beloved*, eyes are given significant attention in the novel.<sup>2</sup> However, this intense focus operates on a level beyond just emphasizing how heavily the dehumanizing white gaze weighs on those forced to bear it. In *Beloved*, eye contact functions as a form of nonverbal communication unintelligible to the whites who witness it. When Paul D is working with other men on a chain gang, "Not one spoke to the other. At least not with words. The eyes had to tell what there was to tell: 'Help me this mornin; 's bad'; 'I'm a make it'; 'New man'; 'Steady now steady' (127). The information and support communicated through this kind of nonverbal interaction is inaccessible to the white drivers in charge of this chain gang. Communicating like this allows the slaves, later on, to figure out an escape plan without talking.

When Paul D tells Sethe about being forced to wear the bit in his mouth, she says people she had seen after wearing it "always looked wild after that. Whatever they used it on them for, it couldn't have worked, because it put a wildness where before there wasn't any" (84). She notes that Paul D doesn't appear to have that wildness in his own eyes, and he responds: "There's a

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<sup>2</sup> Though, interestingly enough, the cliché is startlingly relevant to an analysis of "Get Out," a recent horror film in which the "horror" is the eroticized, commercialized subjugation of black people by whites. Zadie Smith responds to this film in addition to "Open Casket" in the essay I discussed in my introduction.

way to put it there and there's a way to take it out. I know em both and I haven't figured out yet which is worse" (84). The bit removed the ability to communicate through speech for those who were forced to wear it; but that subsequent reaction — the kind of wildness that both Sethe and Paul D understand — seems, in Paul D's world, to be something that could be manipulated into a kind of coping mechanism as well. In a similar way to how Sethe's mother rewrote the meaning of the marks slavery left on her body, Paul D is noting here how he found a choice, limited though it was, regarding strategies in reacting to the pain caused by the white slave owners, a choice they did not intend to provide and would not have been able to register.

While much of Morrison's focus on eyes is attuned to what they offer communicatively among black people, the ability of eye contact to communicate humanity also extends to some of the novel's white characters. When Amy Denver happens upon Sethe, pregnant and in immense pain, "They did not look directly at each other, not straight into the eyes anyway. Yet they slipped effortlessly into yard chat about nothing in particular- except one lay on the ground" (40). Amy, a runaway indentured servant, is no stranger to pain or punishment herself; but she is also inured to a societal gaze that looks upon bodies like Sethe's as less than human. Her inability to look Sethe straight in the eyes in this moment suggests that that gaze, to some extent in this scenario, is vaguely uncomfortable for her to perform or fully inhabit — because they're currently outside of society's gaze in the wildness, because of the pathos of Sethe's condition, especially given the gendered element of pregnancy, or because it creates a kind of uncomfortable intimacy. Yet it is Amy's "fugitive eyes" that persuade Sethe to trust her, just enough — a recognition of some kind of bond with her, tenuous as it may be.

Sethe's eyes are described on several occasions — primarily for their darkness, for their scary quality, for their inability to be read by several characters. To Paul D in the beginning of

the novel, Sethe's eyes "were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held" (10). This quality is shown to be partly the fault of Schoolteacher, whose actions "punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (11). The apex of this particular discussion is the haunting focus on eyes in the account of Sethe's actions in the shed, that leaves one of Schoolteacher's nephews swallowing and shaking in fear:

And they didn't look at the seven or so faces that had edged closer in spite of the catcher's rifle warning. Enough nigger eyes for now. Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off; little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arms of the old nigger whose own eyes were nothing but slivers looking down at his feet. But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn't have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind. (177)

Like Amy when confronted by Sethe on the ground, the white men in this scenario are made supremely uncomfortable specifically by eyes, which seem to be conveying the humanity of the black people involved to an uncomfortable degree. Sethe's eyes are the most unreadable, as it is her actions (and, though they don't see it, her claim to a narrative which I addressed in my first chapter) that are most unfathomable to them.

The access to any kind of literacy of the black characters' eyes is often barred to the white characters, despite the few instances in which glimmers of understanding threaten to break through, like Sethe's interaction with Amy. The same could be said about sound, of "the eruption of voice itself—body merged with word in space" (Pinto 197). Certain sounds hold special meaning for the black characters that are unintelligible to the whites throughout the text. During the women's exorcism of Beloved from 124, once Ella breaks her own silence and hollers, the women

stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.... Together they stood in the doorway. 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... (305-8)

This focus on sound has a powerful aura of reverence around it, though, whether knowingly or unknowingly on Morrison's part, it sharply subverts the phallogocentrism of the opening lines of the Gospel of John in the Bible: "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." And while scholars have documented how this scene corrects the scene in which Sethe kills her child, as she decides to attack the white man rather than her daughter, the significance of sound also corrects how the community had watched Sethe being carted off in silence:

Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and in hers.... Was her head a bit high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. (179)

The community had not warned Sethe of the white men coming with the "Look," due in part to their resentment of Sethe's pride. This prevents them, in an unspoken way, of offering one of the only things that can truly belong to them and be gifted to one another. This kind of sound, both a method of survival and a mode of protection, could be audible, perhaps, to the white people witnessing it, but its resonance would be inaccessible to them.

Like eye contact, sound's ability to carry a hidden meaning is visible in Paul D's experiences in the chain gang. A lone figure — Hi Man — sounds a note without being asked or prompted, that indicates not only the beginning and end of every day of labor for them, but "keeps the men with whom he is chained from the brink. And when the deluge comes, the rain

that almost kills them, locked underground in the mud and silt, in that cage called the slave ship on land — that note provides the means through which, Paul D and the forty-five other men escape that prison ship in Alfred, Georgia” (Sharpe 132).

Though part of the power of sound for the black characters is that its meanings go over the heads of the white characters, there are also moments throughout the text when its power threatens to break through. Sixo, another slave from Sweet Home plantation, once captured, refuses to stay silent. The white men at first are reluctant to kill him, but his laughter and song change Schoolteacher’s mind: “‘this one will never be suitable.’ the song must have convinced him” (265). Throughout the text, black characters reclaim a measure of agency through reclaiming not only their voices — arguably the one effect of their body they still have a more complex level of autonomy over — but the meanings of their sounds, providing each other with healing and comfort in ways that go unregistered or threaten the comfort of the white listeners.

The power to be found in the black characters’ reclamation of their own bodies, voices, and the renewed meanings they can give to each, reaches a joyful culmination in Baby Suggs’ sermons in the Clearing, in which she allows a visceral exercise in physicality and release. She tells the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry, and they obey her. After this healing ritual, she gives her sermon, imploring her listeners to love different parts of their bodies, separately and together: “‘Here...in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. .... ‘And all your inside parts...you got to love them’” (103). When she has finished going through the different parts of the body they must love, she lets her body do the rest of her work for her: “Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of

what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh” (104).

Baby Suggs gives her listeners the power to turn their pain inside out, to use Margo Natalie Crawford’s phrasing. By conflating literal and metaphorical bodily interiority — knitting the flesh to the body and all of the parts of the body together — Baby Suggs reverses the unmaking of black bodies that Spillers notes happened on the Middle Passage and was carried over onto plantations. Through tying together their flesh, voices, and “inside parts,” she allows them to reclaim their humanity in a ritual that would be unintelligible to any white audiences.

So much of *Beloved* is about the physical endurance, memory, and embodiment of trauma — in the body of Beloved, primarily, but also in the house itself (which I address in the next chapter). Morrison goes beyond imagining these stories of pain and trajectories of healing. Through exploring the expressive capabilities of black bodies and the interpretive communities that lovingly respond to them, she is imagining and offering new scripts of agency that the black protagonists could access and circulate among themselves, reclaiming a measure of privacy, self-possession, and communication that slavery had stripped from them.

### Chapter 3

#### Architectural Accessibility: Boundaries, Thresholds and Domestic Spaces

Just as slavery rendered the physical, mental, and emotional interiorities of black people violable, it nullified physical boundaries of safety and thresholds of privacy. In *Beloved*, a journey across state lines to freedom is rendered inconsequential due to the Fugitive Slave Law, a house that was once an open refuge becomes a prison-like vacuum, and its protective barrier (the yard) is breached without a second thought. The house, in American fiction, has often been conceptualized by literary and architectural scholars as the first realm of privacy, the pinnacle of the achievement of the American Dream, and a domestic safe space. But slavery produced a dark underside to these abstractions; the slave's status as property rendered both her body and her physical space infinitely violable, such that her domestic space became a setting for terror and trauma. *Beloved* reveals intrusions upon and literalizes the haunting of the domestic space, often according to a gendered logic. In this chapter, I argue that Morrison literalizes and express the trauma of slavery through the house itself to demonstrate how the "rememory" of those experiences lingers in architectural structures. She then manipulates the accessibility to her characters — and her readers — of the hold of the slave ship and 124, to emphasize how the practice and trauma of slavery disrupted the definitions, boundaries and thresholds of spaces for the black people who were forced to live in it, and deliberately places moments of healing outside of those structures. In short, Morrison's employment of architectural language and her manipulations of access to literal architectural structures force readers to pay attention to trauma as a problem of accessibility in her novel through both the "narrative features of architectural space, and the architectural features of narrative space" (Gleason 26).

Morrison wields architecture as a metaphor to explore the relationship between architectural and narrative spaces in several subtle moments throughout the text. This is seen in how Sethe “circles” the infanticide story, Paul D, and the room, a scene which I addressed in my first chapter. It’s also visible in the scene in which Denver looks into her mother’s window from below and sees a white dress holding Sethe:

“Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window. There was only one door to the house and to get to it from the back you had to walk all the way around to the front of 124, past the storeroom, past the cold house, the privy, the shed, on around to the porch. And to get 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.. (36)

Here, the text collapses the literal environment that Denver is in and the narrative space she is inhabiting or entering, a vivid example, perhaps, of rememory in action.

This collapsing of architectural and narrative spaces is perhaps most resonant in Beloved’s fragmented monologue, which I have argued represents the linguistic climax of the novel. In order to explore an experience that so heavily hinges on its architectural environment — that of slaves in the hold of a slave ship — Morrison rises above the confines of her plot to place Beloved in that space to allow her to testify to that experience. Marianne Hirsch takes this reading further, noting how this passage also marks a kind of conflation in *Beloved*: “Beloved’s is a composite personal and cultural memory that boldly equates the womb with the tomb with the slave ship, the crouching in the Middle Passage with the fetal position...” (195) Much of Beloved’s language hints at the experiences of slaves transported across the Middle Passage; she relates the experience of being cramped up against other bodies in the hold of the slave ship, offering fragmented descriptions of people vomiting, death, the dead being left in piles, and being violated by the crew. As scholars like Spillers have noted, the experiences of the slaves who made this journey are inaccessible for several reasons, not the least of which includes that

stories such as the “sexual violation of captive females and their own expressed rage against their oppressors did not constitute events that captains and their crews rushed to record in letters to their sponsoring companies, or sons on board in letters home to their New England mamas” (Spillers 71). By giving Beloved some ability to speak to this experience — and blurring the distinctions between Beloved’s giving voice to the slaves on ships and her narrative as Sethe’s returned daughter throughout the monologue — Morrison is simultaneously giving her readers access to history and withholding from them a sense of full understanding.

While the hold of the slave ship in Beloved’s monologue cradles much of the interpretive tension of the novel, (and is the closest we get, perhaps, to seeing the uncertainty surrounding Margaret Garner’s story in the text) the most significant architectural structure of the novel is 124 itself. We learn retrospectively that when the house belonged to Baby Suggs, it had been an open and generous safe harbor for slaves:

Before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away; before it had become the plaything of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed.... Who decided that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living but her heart — which she put to work at once. (102)

Upon inhabiting 124, Baby Suggs changes the structure of the house itself to suit her own desires. She turned the outside kitchen into a woodshed and toolroom, ignoring the white folks that told her convention dictated “visitors with nice dresses don’t want to sit in the same room with the cook stove...” (245) She also boarded up the back door that led to it and “built around it to make a storeroom, so if you want to get in 124 you have to come by her” (245). The house, when it belonged to Baby Suggs, was both the incarnation of her “big heart”— her emotional capacity literalized — and a manifestation of her freedom, as was her restructuring of it. After her freedom is purchased through her son’s labor, Baby Suggs’ rebuilding of 124 in literal and

abstract ways almost constructs 124 as the safe and private domestic that a home should be — but this trajectory is interrupted and reversed once Sethe arrives in her yard.

*Beloved* begins years after 124 is transformed from a haven to a haunted house. Its first line personifies the architectural and narrative focal point of the story: “124 was spiteful” (1). The rest of the novel, rather than being broken up by chapters, is broken up by the text’s plotting of major turning points in the narrative through descriptions of the house again: “124 was loud,” (199) and “124 was quiet” (281). These cues — each of which refers to the number without the rest of the address to heighten the focus on the house itself — tie the domestic space of this house to the trajectory of *Beloved*’s hold on the people and the language inside of the house as well. 124 functions as the primary “boundary figure, the containing wall that by its physical presence materializes and secures the separation between interior and exterior, private and public” (Kawash 188), which becomes increasingly apparent once Sethe moves in.

After what Stamp Paid calls “the Misery,” but before the trauma and rememory of the infanticide are articulated through language or embodied through flesh, the “venom” of the baby ghost spits and shudders out of 124 itself. Throughout the beginning of *Beloved*, the house is personified with the emotional reactions of a temperamental child. After 124 becomes spiteful, it begins to push people out, starting with Sethe’s first two children: “...the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it...as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake” (1). It is the haunting expression of trauma through the house specifically that they cannot handle. The house “pitches,” and “the floorboards were [shaking] and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it” (21). Denver is so attuned to the house’s moods and whims that she regards it “as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits” (35). In literalizing

Beloved's trauma as the mood and aura of the house, Morrison is creating a space in which, "boundaries between present and past, living and dead, animate and inanimate, fade and dissolve... The idea of 'ghosts' loses its boundaries in this novel. Habitation, presence, and fullness are expressed in the very character of inanimate things" (Chandler 308-311). And yet, even as boundaries blur and dissolve within the house, the boundary separating the house from the community solidifies after the Misery; the house is already isolated from the community at the time of the novel's open.

Part of the dehumanizing violation that Sethe and Baby Suggs endure — even beyond their sexual and physical abuse — is the white men's disregard for the architectural boundaries that might otherwise have protected Sethe and her family, but didn't: Schoolteacher's crossing of the line marking a free state, and the men's entry into 124's yard when pursuing Sethe. The phrase that Baby Suggs repeats to Stamp Paid to try to get him to understand how she and her family were violated is, "they came into my yard," marking how critical a violation of her family's life this white encroachment on her private space is (211). In Baby Suggs' vehement, yet misunderstood identification of her violation, the reader hears echoes of Sethe's vain efforts to explain Schoolteacher's violation of her at Sweet Home — "They took my milk!" (20) — to Paul D, who fixates more on the fact that they had beaten her while she was pregnant.

The fact that 124 doesn't function as the protective, mothering space it had begun to be for Baby Suggs reflects what Jean Wyatt calls the 'ultimate contradiction of mothering under slavery,' when referring to Sethe's infanticide (Wyatt 476). That this contradiction has been forced onto this home is highlighted in Denver's monologue, in which she expresses her fear at Sethe's choice:

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

something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside this yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too." (242)

Denver partially exonerates her mother through recognizing Sethe's choice was informed by something extrinsic, and that her home's interiority can be violated by this "thing" without question. And yet, her reluctance to leave this house — which by all rights should have remained the safe domestic space that it was briefly for Baby Suggs — because she is scared of what is outside of it and the invasion of that "outside" thing into the house reflects again how slavery, even for Denver, a free child, has produced a haunting of domestic space. She is living in a bounded liminality in which both the space and the exiting of the space pose equal amounts of violence to her. The monologue section of the novel makes clear that in locking her door against the world in order to protect herself and her daughters, Sethe in fact creates a pressurized vacuum, trapping herself and Denver alone with Beloved, an embodiment of the past that once again saturates and threatens to consume the house.

While the foundational and most obvious violations of privacy and safety in *Beloved* are those white encroachments upon black bodies and spaces, and their reverberations, Morrison is also interested in how black characters and communities intra-racially negotiate their bodily and architectural vulnerability. How the aftereffects of slavery permeate the black community of *Beloved* begins with how the black people who saw the white men coming down the road with "the Look" all refrained, from warning Sethe and her family. This intraracial division becomes more apparent through a gendered lens. The black men and women in the novel are inarguably shaped by their similar forced vulnerabilities, yet there exists a power dynamic between them as well. I have argued in my first two chapters that there is a gendered element present in both the

communication of language and the ability to read bodily narratives; this gendered logic is reflected in architectural accessibility as well. This is primarily seen in the trajectory of literal access that Paul D and Stamp Paid have to 124. In the beginning, Paul D feels more at home in 124 than might be expected given the reclusive nature of that house and the women who reside there. One of his first revealed characteristics is his irresistibility to women, not sexually, but in a more surprising way:

Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep—to tell him that their chest hurt and their knees did too. ... (20)

This passage marks his seemingly organic, unhindered access to not only women's crying — an expressive gesture of release that hangs in the space between verbal and nonverbal — and their stories, but also to their houses. His first interaction with Sethe after the two of them had not seen each other in years is no exception; Sethe invites him to stay. The way Sethe conceptualizes his place there once he banishes the baby ghost indicates how he inhabits that space; "...the house crowded in on her... There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made" (47). In carving out a space for himself in 124, he ruptures the uneasy, superficial equilibrium that Sethe and Denver had been living in with the ghost.

This rupture is initially described as a reprieve, but subsequently affects his access to the house. In banishing the baby ghost from 124, Paul D alienates Denver, causing a temporary rift between them and subsequently, himself and Sethe — and effects the embodiment of Beloved. Once established as a member of the household, Beloved begins again to force distance between him and the others. This distance is grounded not only abstractly in communication, as he finds it

more difficult to express how he feels to Sethe once Beloved is around, but also literally measured in the manipulation of architectural boundaries, as Beloved begins to push Paul D out of the house: “She moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby’s ghost—all bang and shriek... But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn’t know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124” (134). In “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Jean Wyatt argues this passage follows the pattern of the literalization of spatial metaphors that culminate in the “materialization of the haunted house”:

... the phrase “she moved him” indicates not only that Beloved stirred Paul D’s emotions but that she physically moved him, from one location to another. The continual shift from the abstract to the concrete creates the illusion of words sliding back to a base in the material world, an effect congruent with Morrison’s emphasis on... the concrete presence of the ghost... (475)

Morrison’s solidifying of this spatial metaphor goes beyond highlighting the materiality of the ghost to literalizing Paul D’s lack of power over himself. Unable to understand and powerless to fight it, Paul D moves from sleeping in Sethe’s bed, to the rocking chair, to Baby Suggs’ bed, to the storeroom, and finally the cold house, making a strikingly clear mental image of him moving farther and farther away from Sethe’s innermost spaces. At first he thinks he is experiencing a “house-fit,” (“the glassy anger men sometimes feel when a woman’s house begins to bind them,” [135]) but realizes he is being prevented from the house. The description of this physical journey out of the house culminates in Beloved’s demand he have sex with her, and his inability to refuse:

...it was more than appetite that humiliated him... it was being moved, placed where she wanted him, and there was nothing he was able to do about it. ... what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise? ... fucking her or not was not the point, it was not being able to stay or go where he wished in 124... (149)

His articulation of the worst part of this hinges on his need for freedom; not only does he feel powerless to control his body, but he feels powerless to access the spaces to which he feels he has a right — and is being controlled by someone he shouldn't be.

Stamp Paid has a comfortable relationship to 124 similar to that of Paul D at the beginning of the novel, a relationship he feels entitled to partly because of his friendship with Baby Suggs but also due the fact that the only thanks he willingly receives from his community is the privilege to walk into anyone's house. But once he shows Paul D the newspaper clipping, he finds his access prevented by means he cannot explain:

Stamp Paid raised his fist to knock on the door he had never knocked on (because it was always open to or for him) and could not do it. Dispensing with that formality was all the pay he expected from Negroes in his debt. Once Stamp Paid brought you a coat, got the message to you, saved your life, or fixed the cistern he took the liberty of walking in your door as though it were his own. ... (203)

Though he finds himself no longer able to walk inside 124, he gets glimpses of the language inside it as he approaches the house, though he can't understand it: "The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word mine. The rest of it stayed outside his mind's reach" (203). The word he is able to make out is also the final word that the reader is given access to in the series of monologues. Like Paul D, to whom women "told things they only told each other," (20) Stamp Paid has not just an unusual access to 124, but the narratives inside of it. Even after he has given up visiting Sethe, he senses something about what he can almost grasp from outside is more than simple language: "When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds. Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house,

recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (235).

Over the course of the novel, the gendered access to the house follows and reflects the gendered access to its narratives. By the end of the story, once Beloved has been exorcised, Stamp Paid regains his comfort in access to the house, and Paul D becomes a permanent fixture of the house — bent on making “some kind of tomorrow” with Sethe. His trajectory of gaining access back into the house is markedly delineated, again, through architectural structures and thresholds: “His coming is the reverse route of his going. First the cold house, the storeroom, then the kitchen before he tackles the beds” (311), which also reflects his entry back into Sethe’s narrative.

A close examination of how the reality of white encroachments upon black spaces and the gendered logic of domestic spaces affect the protagonists in *Beloved* necessitates an examination of what exists outside of these interiors. Throughout the novel, the black characters fashion or redefine their own spaces of interiority, such as Denver’s emerald closet, in back of the field behind 124 that stopped at a wood, which is one of the only spaces she could claim:

between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves. Bent low, Denver could crawl into this room, and once there she could stand all the way up in emerald light. .... First a playroom (where the silence was softer), then a refuge (from her brothers’ fright) soon the place became the point. .... closed off from the hurt of the hurt world... Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish. (35)

This space functions in a protective way that 124 doesn’t or can’t. That the “place became the point” suggests that the space itself — more than the imaginative properties it held for Denver’s uses — was what was of vital importance to her growing up. The emphasis on the literal space

being the “point” is subtly echoed later when the “point” to Paul D, regarding Beloved’s abuse of him, is how it affects his freedom in moving within and around 124.

In Margo Natalie Crawford’s chapter “The Inside-Turned Out Architecture of the Post-New-Slave Narrative,” in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery*, she writes that “Morrison unveils the inside-turned-out architecture of the psychic hold of slavery—the fact that remembering the trauma of slavery is often inseparable from the need to twist and turn this lingering pain *inside out*” (69). While she is talking about a scene in *A Mercy* in which a slave woman has spread so much writing all over the interior of the house that it threatens to overflow, this concept is also applicable to *Beloved*; specifically, in how the healing rituals of the novel — Baby Suggs’ sermon in the Clearing and the exorcism of Beloved from 124 — take place outside the confines of the house. The pain that keeps Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs mostly inside 124 in the beginning of the novel, and then threatens to consume the house when Sethe, Denver and Beloved collapse themselves in a murky possessiveness in the later third, must be turned out. This “turning out” begins with Denver going beyond the yard — after she hears Baby Suggs’ telling her to do so — to Mrs. Jones to seek help in supporting Sethe and Beloved, who get more and more wrapped up in each other after Sethe locks her door. Community women begin leaving food for Denver and her family outside the edges of the yard, and in returning various kitchen accoutrements, Denver forges new relationships with them. Her leaving the house is also what allows her to claim her individuation and her own, private inner life.

Before the Misery, and before “white folks had tired her out at last,” (212) Baby Suggs had been a preacher, giving sermons in the Clearing: “a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (102). In the one description of her sermons, she calls for the children, the men,

and the women. Each group steps out from the trees towards her. She tells the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry. It is a private place known only to some; even within this open space, the children, men, and women move from a more sheltered spot in the trees into the open upon her invitation. Much of Baby Suggs' sermon, which I discussed in greater detail in my last chapter, again connects the need to love the inside parts of their bodies and the need to turn out the pain from the houses. Like Denver's closet, Baby Suggs' sermon takes place

... beyond the edges of town... These flights into the wilderness are portrayed ... as moments of grounding, renewals of contact with primary sources of spirituality and vitality — moments when contact with things invisible and too subtle to penetrate the walls of houses restores the energy, vision, and sense of purpose that gives the women the strength they need. ... The renewing power of the wilderness... an old American theme, is replayed here with peculiar significance in relation to the lives of women to whom the land has never belonged except as a vehicle of secret fantasies of freedom and a place of periodic escape from the duties of domestic life (Chandler 293-4).<sup>3</sup>

Many aspects of Baby Suggs' sermon in the Clearing — the healing element of the removal of self and community from the interiority of architectural structures — are mirrored or built upon in the exorcism of Beloved from 124 by community women, organized by Ella. As Beloved grows stronger, Sethe grows weaker. It is partly due to Denver's bravery that some of the women of the community agree to help Ella, once she becomes aware of the situation and intuits who exactly Beloved is and what she represents, in her decision to expel this flesh-and-blood ghost from the house. Ella's conviction is backed by her belief that some "communication" between her world and that of the ghosts of the past is okay, but "this was an invasion" (302) — a word choice that strongly emphasizes the breaching of a threshold or boundary. Ella, who measures all atrocities committed against what she experienced growing up in a house belonging to white men who sexually abused her in ways the texts denies us access to

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<sup>3</sup>Chandler, in this excerpt, is actually addressing not only *Beloved* but also *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson.

believes the past to be “something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (302).

Much has been written concerning this exorcism’s reversal and correction of the scene in which Sethe attempts to kill her children; when she sees the white men coming down the road in that scene, she turns her weapon against her children, whereas in this scene, when she sees a white man in the midst of the community women’s praying/exorcism, she goes after him (Henderson). But the exorcism also holds another, more subtle reversal of the former scene: the directional orientation outside of interior structures. Morrison emphasizes people are looking in the wrong direction even when they’re outside of the house, and could hypothetically have turned around.

In the first scene, it is Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid who are looking in the wrong direction, and so do not see the white men coming down the road. This is revealed when Stamp Paid is thinking about all of the details of the story of the infanticide story that he withholds from Paul D: “Baby Suggs... kept looking down past the corn to the stream so much that he looked too. ... he watched where Baby was watching. Which is why they both missed it: they were looking the wrong way — toward the water — and all the while it was coming down the road” (184). In the exorcism scene, the focus is on Denver: “She was looking to the right, in the direction Mr. Bodwin would be coming from. She did not see the women approaching, accumulating slowly in groups of twos and threes from the left. Denver was looking to the right” (303). Incidentally, a third instance in *Beloved* in which directionality is explicitly emphasized is when Sethe overhears “voices” coming from the barn in which she is later raped; upon getting closer to the barn, she hears her name come out of schoolteacher’s mouth, as he is talking about dividing her human and animal characteristics. She then describes how she “commenced to walk

backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back" (228). The explicit focus on directionality in these three instances may be read as linking slavery's lingering effects on bodies to the effects slavery has on how those bodies inhabit and move in their worlds — both interior and exterior.

By making architectural access an obvious point of gendered differences in the narrative, Morrison is highlighting how critical a role the power over space (in addition to bodily literacy) plays in the narrative of slavery's lingering effects. She is complicating boundaries between language, bodies and architecture to solidify for the reader the lasting effects of violations of black interiority. The prominence of architecture as an overarching framework throughout *Beloved* highlights how "...a privileged understanding of how space works and mediates individual experience lies at the heart of African American writing. ... Ultimately we are talking about the spatialization of power (or the power of spatialization) - how, where and by whom" (Soto 33).

## Conclusion

### Passing on This Story

I introduced this project with the issues surrounding “Open Casket” because I’m seeing a proliferation in American academic discourse about reckoning with slavery and its residue — or, as Christina Sharpe puts it, the “wake of slavery” (116) — at the same time as an accelerated interest in holding artists accountable for their politics of racial representation. I was intrigued by not only the implications of the controversy over “Open Casket” specifically, but how it circulates within a larger story. In her essay, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Claudia Rankine writes that

We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against.

She then goes on to discuss the story of Emmett Till in a different way than Smith does, focusing on his mother, who requested an open coffin for her son, and allowed photographs to be taken and published: “Mobley’s refusal to keep private grief private allowed a body that meant nothing to the criminal justice system to stand as evidence. ... she ‘disidentified’ with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a warning to the black community, thereby using the lynching tradition against itself.”

Smith and Rankine are exploring the relationship between the narratives of black bodies and lives, the language used to render them, and the public infrastructures within which those narratives and bodies simultaneously circulate. The connection between their work and my project here might best be captured in Morrison’s comments in an interview with World

Magazine in 1989, in which she draws a connection between the absences of slave narratives in our language and our architecture, almost collapsing, once again, the boundaries between the literal and the metaphorical:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves . . . There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist . . . the book had to. (Andrews 3)

Almost thirty years later, her words still resonate. Yet I would argue the lack of sensitive and powerful markers directing our attention to this absence is compounded by what we might call, to use Sethe's term, the presence of literal, architectural "rememories" of slavery. The exponential increase in debates over whether to pull down Confederate statues and rename buildings, centers, and streets, indicates a growing awareness of how our architecture not only performs its literal functions, but operates on a more abstract level, literally and figuratively molding our daily lives and grounding us in our own history even as we strive to reckon with its lingering effects — in our language, in our art, and in our infrastructures.

As time continues to pass, pieces of American history will continue to be forgotten: deliberately or accidentally, in catharsis or carelessness. Hidden papers fading in attics will crumble into dust, memorabilia will be dutifully catalogued and tucked into corners of museum archives, unrecorded oral histories will grow weaker. In short, some pieces of history will grow even more inaccessible, even as writers, historians, and scholars (such as those to whom I am intellectually indebted for this project) work tirelessly towards bearing witness. And yet, the struggles of access that I have tried to map out in this project — to the narratives of the "inner lives" of slaves, to the literacy of the scripts of agency Morrison has imagined, to articulation of

traumatic memories — may point, more specifically, to the politics of responding to the ignorance relation that slavery presents us. How can we go forward when we are in a position of not-knowing? How do we, as M. NourbeSe Philip so unflinchingly asks, tell a story that cannot be told but must be? She suggests that perhaps certain stories can only be told through their own un-tellings; in this novel, Morrison forces us to consider how to confront that un-telling itself. *Beloved* both does and does not offer answers, withholding certainty from us either way.

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