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## Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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*Helene Moglen*

Since the twinned birth of bourgeois capitalism and the novel in the eighteenth century, realism and fantasy have represented the Janus-faced Enlightenment through their several genres, constituting each other as fictive modes while appearing to be mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup> Functioning to illuminate the shadow side of individualism, rationalism, and social progress, early fantastic fictions revealed the price paid for the increasing rigidity of epistemological, social, sexual, and racial boundaries. In gothic fictions written at the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the anxieties and wishes that had been excluded from realistic narratives in the interests of personal and social identity appeared in supernatural form to belie realism's myths of finished bodies, linear histories, distinct differences, and integrated texts.<sup>2</sup> Then, as realistic fictions of the nineteenth century employed social, sexual, and racial "others" thematically in order to mediate external and internal conflict, fantastic fictions became more psychologically focused, and dissolved the distinction between self and other by revealing how the "other" serves as an instrument in the construction of the self.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to

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read, as part of this discourse of differentiation and subjectification, both Freud's theoretical narratives and the revisions of them phrased by Anglo-American and French feminists, as well as by Lacan. Reading the theory and the fiction as expressive of the same tradition helps us to understand the power of the fantastic to map the social and psychological relations of self and other, as well as the genre's tendency to enmesh itself in the obsessional dynamic it explores. Adopting this approach, I wish to show how, in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison significantly reconceptualizes the psychological dynamic of differentiation and the social consequences of othering by radically interrogating the fantastic tradition within which she also writes.

At the border of the unconscious and the conscious—or, in Lacanian terms, at an edge between the Imaginary and the Symbolic—the fantastic, through all of its genres, struggles to undo the processes of signification and differentiation that are fundamental to psychological and social experience. Its narratives reflect the encounter between the I and the not-I that takes place in the development and enculturation of the self. For Freud, the process of differentiation is staged at a moment between primary narcissism and object love. Lacan names it the “mirror stage,” a phase of the Imaginary that he locates between the chaos of the Real and the formal structures of the Symbolic. It is here that the self comes to know itself as object, as if it were reflected in the gaze of others. Freud's super-ego is born here, as is Lacan's ego ideal (*Je-idéal*). For both Lacan and Freud, this is the social self that watches, reproaches, and directs, enforcing the systems of cultural difference that are rooted in psychic differentiation. While realism expresses the bounded aspirations of that self, the fantastic voices its desire to return to the wholeness that existed before the fall into fragmented subjectivity and cultural difference. While the realistic narrative thematizes a rational cultural order, the fantastic reproduces the contradictory strategies that the subject employs both to heal and to deny its alienation. Anxieties aroused by psychic fragmentation are projected in fantasy onto others who are then distinguished as radically different from the self, at the same time that the differences which threaten the ego's integrity are denied and union with the Other, who represents those differences, is experienced as essential for the self's

completion. In the first instance, the Other is the object of intense fear and hatred; in the second, an object of equally intense desire. And although the resolution to the quandary of the self—caught as it is between fear and desire—ostensibly takes place with the entry of the subject into the Symbolic Order, that resolution is necessarily undermined by the deeper psychic functions which determine it but which it knows only in a mediated form. Always resistant, the fantastic narrative may be subsumed under but cannot be merged with its realistic Other, and when it is itself the dominant mode, it ends inevitably with dissolution or in death—the only gestures capable of finally interrupting the repetitive cycle that denies alterity while affirming it.<sup>4</sup>

The process of differentiation through which the subject is constructed finds stark expression in the fears of difference that inform sexual, racial, and socio-economic stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> These fears not only structure fantastic fictions; they also permeate the theories we deploy to understand psychic anxieties and their fictive representations. So, in psychoanalytic theory, cultural misogyny pervades the developmental story, and woman, as the phobic object, is perceived both as castrated and castrating. Addressing cultural and personal misogyny in their rewritings of that story, American feminists have used object relations theory to give originary force to the mother-child dyad instead of to the oedipal triangle. Tracing different processes of differentiation, and therefore different relational patterns for women than for men, they have explored the implications of such differences for cognitive styles, moral philosophies, and sexual practices.<sup>6</sup> Significant as this work has been, its tendency simply to reverse the marginal and dominant terms of the developmental narrative—substituting male for female, female for male—has strengthened a dynamic that ensures the reproduction of stereotypical thinking. Developmental accounts of the construction of racial identities have been oppositional in similarly problematic ways. For example, Frantz Fanon insists upon the connection between psychic development and cultural psychosis, and grounds the “massive psychoexistential complex” of racism in the “subjective insecurity” of separation anxiety and the radical experience of fragmentation (55). Citing Lacan, he argues that the white man is threatened by the black man with the deconstruction of his bodily image, while the

black man rejects the black Imaginary for a white ego ideal and is doomed to seek from his white Other the fundamental recognition that is inevitably withheld (161).<sup>7</sup> While Homi Bhabha changes the site of othering in his extension of Fanon's Lacanian argument, he does not disrupt the mirroring dynamic. Insisting upon the ways in which stereotypical relations are based, for both the colonizer and the colonized, on an alienation *within* identity, he emphasizes not the relation of self and Other, but the otherness of the self. The native subject whom the colonizer defines at once as harmlessly primitive and terrifyingly savage serves in his judgment as a fetish object similar to the phallic mother in Freud's account. In both cases, the fetish allows the assertion and disavowal of difference that threatens psychic wholeness, and offers a compromise that reinforces while it veils the regressive struggle of alterity. In racial as in sexual terms, therefore, the closed cycle of subjectification that is rooted in the Imaginary comes to seem as unalterable as it is determinant.

The point is that feminist and racially centered psychoanalytic theories have provided readings of the dynamic of othering that, while helpful in accounting for the deep structure of stereotypes, have also tended to reproduce the dyadic thinking which it has been their project to interrogate. Like the gothic fictions from which they have descended, these revisionary narratives rehearse the hallucinatory delusions of the Imaginary and participate in the shared psychosis of the cultural Symbolic. With other fantastic readings of ideology and desire, they reveal the difficulty that we always have in locating a world elsewhere—a place to stand from which to see the social and psychic landscape as not only changing but as available to change. They suggest the extent to which the limits and possibilities of the fantastic conception are in large part established by perspectival positionings *within* the dominant ideologies that are interrogated. While it is true that fantasy seeks to name the unnameable, that which is named implicitly as real determines what can be imagined as unspoken. Exclusions shape inclusions, as we know, and both are products of the belief systems through which they are conceived. So Rochester's mad wife marks with her voicelessness the limit of a proper woman's speech. Conrad projects the heart of darkness, but leaves it to others to map its specificities. And while Melville may well have

set out to interrogate the ideology of whiteness in *Moby-Dick*, he could not, any more than Ahab, move beyond it, as in writing *Benito Cereno* he could not enter Babo's mind but only imagined him enacting as masquerade the white idea of blackness.<sup>8</sup>

In the American and European traditions, the ideologies that have defined realism and its fantastic double have been largely white, heterosexual, male, and middle-class. While differently conceptualized in terms of gender, female-authored writings in this genre have reflected the same dominant sexual, racial, and socio-economic relations. Exploring the conflictual dynamic of race from the perspective of the racial Other, Fanon and Homi Bhabha were able to revise significantly the mindscapes of Lacan and Freud. But because they did not interrogate the gender bias that they inherited, their blind spots remained structurally the same. Defining the struggle of racial identity at the level of the male Imaginary, they did not move beyond their oppositional definitions to resist the fetishizing phallicism of psychoanalytic theory. Inevitably, this affected not only their analyses of the relations of race, but also their treatments of the then-secondary othernesses of gender and of class. The subject that they define is universalized in its maleness and embedded in a history which, as psychology's Other, is appropriated and erased.<sup>9</sup>

To achieve a more adequate and more emancipatory understanding of difference, we must refuse theoretical binarisms and insist upon the centrality of history in our analyses. The social relations of a culture are not simply oppositional, as we know, but are multiple and complexly interactive. Desire is performed within history at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class, and although there are no epistemological positions at this level outside of those relations, there are many shifting and even contradictory positions within them. Further, the history of the subject is not limited, in Lacanian terms, to the Imaginary and Symbolic but extends backward to the moment of the Real. To travel back through the mirror of the Imaginary toward that primal space is to claim another dimension of self-formation that underlies and resists the dynamic of othering. In the fundamentally misogynistic mode of the fantastic, that moment has been ambivalently identified with the primal mother: the origin of all difference and the site of ultimate loss, so powerful that her pres-

ence can never be directly known but only mediated through the fears and longings of her sons and daughters. The fantastic narrative seems to gesture always toward her at the same time that it veils her in obscurity. Like the whiteness of Moby Dick and the blackness of Conrad's Africa, she is thought to mark all difference that is the absence of differentiation; she holds the promise of all meaning that is also the threat of meaninglessness. She reveals the fetishizing nature of language, the impotence of the symbolic: the unmasking of the ideal of whiteness as illusion. Asocial, she is outside of history. Apolitical, she neither changes nor can she be responsible for change. She is often represented by the death wish that erases resistance, and in this form she overwhelms the subversive impulses of the fantastic in its many genres.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison lifts the primal mother out of that pre-linguistic space and returns her to history, exploring the complexities of her social construction at the same time that she deepens our understanding of the place within the self from which that mythic figure is believed to come. By centering in her narrative a black woman who is, not incidentally, a mother, Morrison documents the tragic human cost of being "other," and takes us into the dim regions of desubjectification and undifferentiation that were not explored by Freud or by Lacan. As a result, she refuses the conventional oppositions of realism and the fantastic, of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, and of the socio-political and the psychological. Moving beyond the Fanonian conception of *The Bluest Eye*, which largely assumed a black subjectivity constructed in relation to a white ego-ideal, Morrison asks more radical questions about the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of a socio-economic, gendered, and racial subject. In a work which is the product both of romance and realism—neither romantic realism nor realistic romance—a whole tradition is, in effect, revised: Bertha speaks, the heart of darkness is illuminated, and Ahab encounters Moby Dick and lives. By reconceptualizing the relation of the genres that she writes within, Morrison radicalizes both realism and the fantastic, and establishes new structures through which to reproduce and to re-educate desire.

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In a "Conversation" with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison explains that *Beloved* was inspired by the stories of two quite differ-

ent women. One was the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who attempted the murder of her four children—successfully killing only her baby daughter—when she was caught as a fugitive: “She had made up her mind that they would not suffer the way that she had and it was better for them to die” (584). The other was the story of an eighteen-year-old girl shot by a jealous lover. The girl ensured his escape with her silence but, deprived of medical care, she paid for her silence with her life. Morrison was interested in the “female form of love” that these two historical figures exemplified, suggesting to her as they did that “the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves” (585). In considering “what it is that compels a good woman to displace . . . her self,” Morrison imagined the psychic selves of her historical subjects not as integral and whole, but rather as internally divided. Projecting the self as other *to* itself—as “a *twin* or a *thirst* or a *friend*”—Morrison conceptualized *Beloved* in the fantastic mode while giving it a realistic reference. She followed the tradition of early gothic in conceptualizing the split-off self as a supernatural spirit that lives into the present after death, marking in its own immateriality the materiality of history; and she follows the romantic tradition by projecting it also as a ghostly double that enacts fragmentation and alienation, mirroring “others,” who are also projections of the self and are themselves internally divided.

Serving both of these fantastic functions, *Beloved* is literally the ghost in the machine of Morrison’s fiction. She is the haunting spirit of the baby daughter whom Sethe as a captured fugitive kills. She is that part of Sethe which, truncated, cannot be adequately mourned: a profound rupture that cannot be healed. She is the other of the others—of Sethe’s daughter, Denver, and of Paul D, Sethe’s lover—evoked by their desire from a place beneath blocked memory. But *Beloved* is also more than this, and it is here that Morrison situates herself at the boundary of fantasy and realism: she is the representative of the “sixty million and more” victims of slavery: of a collective tragedy which, as history, must be remembered and redeemed. *Beloved*’s story is a story of personal and collective loss: the deprivation of home, abandonment by an enslaved mother, the erasure of a disinherited father, the alienation of her body in rape and of her mind in the shattering of the mirror of identity.



If *Beloved* speaks to the inadequacies of memory in its efforts to retrieve a personal and collective past, she speaks even more powerfully, through her mediations, to the risks and dangers of forgetting.<sup>10</sup> To repress memory, “to keep the past at bay,” is to divert it into the dark silences and crippling diversions of hysteria: Denver’s two-year muteness after she discovers from a classmate that her mother murdered her baby sister; Sethe’s stammer, from the time of her own mother’s lynching to the time when she meets and falls in love with Halle; Halle’s madness after he witnesses Sethe’s violation; Paul D, who “locks away his heart in a tobacco tin buried in his chest” and “shuts down a generous portion of his head” in order to avoid reliving the symbolic castration of his imprisonment; and Baby Suggs, who takes to her bed after the murder of her grandchild, to ponder color: the color that Sethe, after she saws off the head of her baby, is no longer able to see. Paul D can urge Sethe to remember—“Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out” (46)—but the truth is that neither of them can confront in themselves that which would make it possible for each to listen to and hear the other. For those who have survived the collective trauma of racism, “the day’s serious work is beating back the past” (73).

The hysteria that allows the self to survive, but not to prosper, mirrors the cultural psychosis which is its cause. As hysteria signs itself as an inability to represent, cultural psychosis articulates itself as a disease of representation. The compromises sought by fears of psychic fragmentation are achieved through representational systems that order difference at specific historical moments on behalf of hegemonic interests. Through mutually constitutive discourses of sexuality, race, class, and gender, some subjects are marked collectively as phobic objects. Schoolteacher, the slave-master who inherits Sweet Home along with Sethe, Paul D, and Halle, beats one of his blacks “to show him that definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined” (190), but the power relations of representation are revealed as more complex than Schoolteacher’s arrogance allows. In fixing the “other,” one fixes oneself as the Other of the other. The fetishized object is shaped by fetishistic desire, and the need to objectify reproduces the fear of objectification which produces it. In the terms of *Beloved*, black

men and women struggle to throw off the white imago that reflects them to themselves, while white women and men bind themselves inextricably to the grotesque doubles projected by their own irrational anxieties. Morrison's project is to explore the ways in which those who have been systematically deprived of psychic and social identities can in fact sustain and reinvent themselves, while she wishes also to reveal how those positioned as oppressors might not be doomed endlessly to repeat the fearful processes of their own de-subjectification.

Toward the end of *Beloved*, Stamp Paid—a former slave—listens to the “undecipherable language” that emanates from Sethe's house, and identifies the mumbling voices as those of nameless black and angry dead bemoaning the psychic alienation imposed upon them by whites who had then to suffer it themselves:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. . . . [U]ntil it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198–99)

While Stamp Paid analyzes the causes of psychic fragmentation at the level of the Symbolic, the voices which he hears reveal a deeper level of meaning. Not nameless at all, these voices prove to belong to Sethe and Beloved, who are attempting in their bafflement to heal the deepest wounds of violent separation. In their encounter, which is grounded in the pre-oedipal rather than in

the oedipal moment, the central presence is the mother's, not the father's, and the fetish object which is unveiled as fundamental is not the phallus—as Lacan and Freud would have it—but the lost signifier which is the breast: the milk-filled breast of the black woman. This is made clear in the novel's primal scene which is staged by Schoolteacher with his nephews as an experiment intended to demonstrate the animality of blacks. Recalled by Sethe, it centers on “two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up” (70). It is a scene that haunts Sethe in her flight from Sweet Home, intent on bringing her milk to one infant daughter, and to bearing the other in freedom. And it is the memory of this scene that motivates her finally to murder. It is a scene that reduces Halle, who watches it, to a figure of childish impotence, “squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as the clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his mind” (70). A perversion of the primal scenes which Freud describes as marking the origins of the subject, sexuality, and sexual difference, this scene lays bare the whites' impulse to reject black subjectivity in order to eradicate the black roots of the white Imaginary.<sup>11</sup> A nursing that is also an enforced milking, an appropriation of maternal nurturance as eroticized violence, a parodic rewriting of the family connection: all reveal the knot of power, anger, fear, and desire that bind the white man to the black woman—the white child to the black breast.

We have come increasingly to recognize the significance of the nursemaid in Freud's work and, more broadly, in the late Victorian bourgeois male imagination.<sup>12</sup> Responsible for the child's most intimate functions, the nursemaid, despite her inferior status, had the power to shame, to discipline, and to arouse. Erotic and degrading, she opened the claustal cell of the nuclear family to social difference which, through her, was sexualized.<sup>13</sup> As the impure “other” of the maternal ideal, she was identified with infantile pleasure, anxiety, and dependence. The fascination and desire that she inspired were intensified by prohibition, and made resistant to the societal control by which they were deformed. In similarly deep and pervasive ways, the black slave woman haunted the cultural and personal Imaginary of the antebellum South. Often wet nurse as well as maid, she figured

intimacy and was rejected as taboo. The locus of separation and the site of longing, she was the source of goodness, an object of repulsion, the promise of merging and the mark of differentiation. To claim her, as Sethe is claimed, through a violent sexuality that reproduces while it denies her maternal connection, is to assert masculine and racial autonomy through incestuous transgression. A similar fetishistic act that disavows through degradation occurs when the chained male slaves—Paul D among them—are forced as a group to perform fellatio on their guards. It is a ritual of white male bonding intended to humiliate its victims by feminizing them, parodying while rehearsing the primal act of nurturance.

The material project of slavery, as *Beloved* makes clear, is the commodification of the black body; the psychic result is that body's sexualization. So Paul D, who believed he knew his value "as a laborer who could make profit on a farm," discovers, when he is sold by Schoolteacher from Sweet Home, "[t]he dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future" (226). Sethe's worth, like the worth of all black women, is greater than a male laborer's because she is also, crucially, a breeder: herself property, she reproduces property in her children. Without legal status or acknowledged familial connection, both male and female slaves are excluded from the world of social subjects. Defined biologically, they are, like animals, granted sexual function but not gender definition. Because they are represented ideologically as only "male" and "female," the roles of men and women are systematically denied them. But to be ideologically identified with nature is also to be identified with nature's otherness. The fears and desires associated with miscegenation and black potency—the white fetishization of the black breast and penis—reflect the power of that identification: the psychological cost of the material project. If the problem for whites, then, is the social and psychological management of negrophobia, the critical act of social and psychological resistance for blacks involves a reclamation of sexual and cultural identity in the absence of social rights and privileges.<sup>14</sup> In laying bare the agonies of this process, Morrison extends and interrogates the accounts of subjectification that have been offered by male psychoanalytic theorists and by many psychoanalytic feminists.

As Morrison conceptualizes the process, it begins with the one social function that blacks cannot be denied in the nightmare world of slavery: that of mothering. While males are called upon to act as studs, and as fathers are known generally in absence,<sup>15</sup> the fact of maternity continues to exist when all appurtenances are stripped away. While the black patronymic is erased, the child inherits its mother's statusless condition. That inheritance paradoxically marks social affiliation and identity: historical continuity that originates in a place before othering. Although slave children are not the material possessions *of* their mother, they are, as Morrison suggests, possessed *by* her in the intensity of a relationship which resonates in memory. The story that Morrison tells provides a version—with important differences—of psychoanalytic narratives which, in their male and female forms, represent the mother as the irreducible matrix of the child's development: the unachievable object of a desire that cannot know but must forever seek its origins. For Freud, the maternal body grounds the recurrent experience of the uncanny, motivating the matrophobia that motivates the oedipal narrative. It is the home which is most intimately familiar and always strange. It holds the promise of blissful mergence and the threat of fearful obliteration. For Lacan, the mother is a more elusive figure who enables the child's entry into a world of language in which she must herself be always silent. Feminists who have attempted to reclaim that mother in their rereadings of Lacan and Freud have assumed similar postures of infantile dependence in creation myths that both idealize and blame her.<sup>16</sup> It is the same ambivalence that structures fantastic fictions: the male fear and desire before such fantasized omnipotence, as in Ahab's quest for Moby Dick; the female obsession with dead, displaced, and insane mothers whose power they must, at all costs, escape.<sup>17</sup>

*Beloved* removes this omnipotent and yet powerless mother from the place before desire and brings her into history in the figure of the black woman whose children are born into the alienated relations of slavery. Her story has many variations in the novel, but its shape is constant over time. She is remembered by Sethe as an aching absence: a distant, barely recognizable figure laboring in the fields; a body so disfigured in death that even the brand that marked her cannot be read. From another slave, Sethe

learns of the spiritual and psychic violence, physically enacted, that characterized her life. Abduction first and rape; resistance staged in the murder of children born of violation, in thwarted efforts to escape, and in a nameless action which lynching punishes. Sethe seeks her in a series of substitutes: in Nan, the slave woman who nursed her after the white babies had drunk their fill; in Mrs. Garner, her mistress at Sweet Home; and finally in Baby Suggs. In her own life, Sethe attempts to fill her absence by providing as mother what she could not be provided as daughter, but she discovers that she is also implicated in the cycle of violence by which she was herself produced.

Deprived of a social identity and placed outside the law, Sethe conceives of herself as the primal mother has been conceived: not in and for herself but in relation to her children. Nourishing them, she nourishes herself; sustaining them, she sustains a gendered subjectivity which has them as its point of reference. She knows “[t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (251). But she believes that there is one part of herself that is excluded from that violation: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (251). When Schoolteacher and his nephews appropriate her maternal body, she discovers that there is no aspect of herself that is in fact secure against the violations of that society. Still, because she does not differentiate her children from herself, she believes that she can destroy them *by* herself when the alternative is to have them placed once more in the power of the master. For a moment, she claims the right to *be* the primal mother, giving and taking life without responsibility to another with a subjectivity not her own. It is from that mother that Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Bugler, finally flee. It is Denver’s fear of her that makes her mute, that gives her nightmares, that imprisons her in the yard, desperately attempting through her despairing love to forestall what happened once from happening again.

But because the primal mother is a mythic projection, she cannot be embodied any more than Sethe can be excluded or can exclude herself from a human community of rights and respon-

sibilities. As Sethe comes to recognize when she thinks of School-teacher's book about the inferiority of Blacks, "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (271). It is through Beloved that Sethe learns the significance of her act because it is to her murdered daughter that she feels the need to justify the past. For Sethe, Beloved is the infant whom she bore into slavery; the child for whose liberty she was willing to sacrifice her life; the slaughtered innocent whose headstone she purchased with her body; the baby ghost whose spiteful presence gave her solace; and the spectral girl who embodies her own desire both as abandoning mother and as abandoned daughter. While Beloved is all of this for Sethe—and something different for Denver and Paul D—Morrison is at pains to suggest the ways in which she is, like all "others," possessed of her own narrative and immersed in a collective history. In herself, she may be, as Paul D suggests, any "young color woman . . . drifting from ruin" (52); or she may be the specific girl whom Stamp Paid remembers as "locked up in the house with a white man over by Deer Creek. . . . Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup" (235). Beloved tells a version of Stamp Paid's story to Denver, describing herself as "snatched away from a woman who was hers," and violated by the one "whiteman" whom she knew (119). In the transitional voice of the pre-conscious, speaking what she remembers not as words but as pictures, she tells of the Middle Passage—the journey from freedom to captivity—when the eternality of home and the unity of self were lost. The recurrent theme of all her stories suggests that whoever Beloved is, and whoever she is for others, her longing is the longing and her rage the rage of all children abandoned in untimely separation from their mothers, and oppressed as others in an alien culture. Her need and her resentment reflect and answer to Sethe's own.

What Beloved, as daughter, wants from Sethe, and what Sethe, as daughter-mother, wants from Beloved, is the connection shattered in the mirror in which identity is achieved: a return to the place before othering—the place before desire. Beloved remembers the woman who, like Sethe's mother, never smiled at her; the mother who, like Sethe's mother, was collared and who, like Sethe herself, wore shining earrings. She remembers an edenic moment of wholeness: "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” (210). She remembers the instant when the unity was lost: an instant, for her mother, of suicide and, for herself, of a kind of psychic death: “I see the dark face that is going to smile at me . . . it is my dark face that is going to smile at me . . . she goes in the water with my face” (212). Before her rebirth into Sethe’s life, she too dives beneath the water, into the mirror where, Narcissus-like, she sees the fragmented pieces that make up her self: “my face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join . . . I want to be the two of us . . . I want the join” (213). When she emerges from the water, she believes that she has found in Sethe’s face the face that she once lost. “She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine” (214). And it is in Sethe that she submerges once again.

“Mine.” It is the only word that Stamp Paid can make out in “the conflagration of hasty voices” that he hears as belonging to the dead. It is the word spoken initially—in a fantastic chorus—by Denver, Sethe, and Beloved. But Denver claims Beloved as “mine,” because it is only from Beloved that she derives a sense of her own separateness. When Beloved looks at her, she experiences herself as a subject, “pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eye of the other” (118). Replacing the Daddy for whom Denver longs, Beloved triangulates the suffocating dyadic relation that Denver has had with Sethe, and provides her a transitional space from which she can prepare herself to enter a social world in which the horror of her mother’s past is known. But it is precisely because she wants to be recognized as integral that she is finally irrelevant to her mother and her sister, each of whom desires the other not in-relation but in-identity. For Beloved, “[Sethe] is the laugh. I am the laughter” (214). For Sethe, the blood that runs in Beloved’s veins, the blood which she in desperation spilled, is also her own nurturing milk. It is a reciprocal desire that at first facilitates the healing retrieval of memory as Sethe, to give Beloved pleasure, tells stories of a past which had been shrouded previously in silence. But as they voice their pain, they speak increasingly to themselves and not to one another.



Their feelings are not expressed in words but, as Stamp Paid recognizes, in sounds; their references, as Beloved observes, are imagistic. And as they follow their needs into a darkness before language, they are unable to find a direction back.

Denver realizes that the desire of each to return to a place in which she can merge with and possess the other initiates a life-and-death struggle that neither can survive. Beloved's voraciousness, which makes it seem to Denver that she has "invented desire," is clearly matched by Sethe's insatiable need to sustain at all costs the life that she had taken. "Sethe was trying to make up for the hand-saw; Beloved was making her pay for it. . . . Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused" (251, 252). As in many fantastic fictions, the urge to complete the self takes a perversely sado-masochistic turn which maintains both Sethe and Beloved on the border of mutual and self-destruction. Sethe, who gives her substance to Beloved, begins to starve to death. Beloved, pregnant with Paul D's child, swells also with Sethe's life, upon which—in its separateness—her own psychic survival depends.

In the relation between Beloved and Sethe, Morrison takes us to the place toward which the fantastic always gestures and from which realism shrinks. It is a place similar to the one Kristeva has explored in her discussion of "abjection": a psychic state identified with the archaic experience of differentiation and grounded in the pre-oedipal moment named by Kristeva as the "semiotic." Existing at the border of language and desire, abjection cannot be grasped by the linear logic of realism, but—affective and heterogeneous—it resonates with the impulses of the fantastic. It is accessible directly through social and psychological processes of de-subjectification and can be reached as well through the mediative power of poetry and religion. A place of horror that is also transformative, the abject unveils the void upon which the signifying process relies. Revealing the primary fetishism of language, it also provides, in the pure signifiers of its own semiotic discourse, evidence of a sign system that is not linguistically based.<sup>18</sup>

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the way in which individuals located at the border between neurosis and psychosis return to a state of abjection in order to initiate their projects of psychic reparation. By accepting "the first authentic feeling of a

subject in the process of constituting itself," they can begin to experience desire and engage "what will become, but only later, objects" (47). In *Beloved*, at the intersection of realism and fantasy, Morrison maps a similar progress at a specific historical moment. In her exploration of the deconstructive and reconstructive processes of subjectification, she provides a reading of what Fanon called the "massive psychoexistential complex" of racism (55), breaking through the obsessive cycle of the Imaginary and opening out the oppositional relations of desire. She shows how the racial and sexual othernesses of the Symbolic originate in archaic fear and aggression, which, in the pre-oedipal relation, project as threatening to the self a yet-unlocalizable object. It is that fear that precedes desire (primary narcissism later masked as incest) which Schoolteacher and his nephews seek to contain. By constructing the boundaries of their subjectivities through transgression, they deconstruct—at material and psychic levels—the subjectivities of the defiled others. As the othered others, Sethe and Paul D struggle by evading memory to evade the abjection to which they have been reduced; but like the patients of whom Kristeva writes, they can move out of the abyss only by traveling through it. *Beloved* serves as the intermediary in their voyages: a split-off fragment of themselves that, as both plenitude and absence, represents the promise and horror of the archaic world in which subjectification begins.

Priced, sold, chained, and collared, Paul D learns that manhood cannot "lie in the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know," for Schoolteacher can erase the honorific "man," bestowed by Garner, and "break into children what Garner had raised into men" (220). Everything, Paul D learns, rested on Garner's being alive, for "without his life, each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery, or what is it?" (220). Enduring the loss of his brothers, the lynching of one friend, and the imposed madness of another, Paul D knows the rooster, Mister, to be "freer, better than me. Stronger. Tougher" (72). On the chain gang, he is reduced to a state of abject fear from which he runs as a fugitive, locking his memories "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (72–73). There is no past to ground him, and he is filled with awe and envy when he hears of other people's families. He comes to believe that he can only find

the core of his manhood in paternity, and asks Sethe to bear his child. It would be a way, he thinks, “to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell—all in one” (128). But *Beloved*’s spell has got to be endured. *Beloved* moves him, like a “rag doll,” out of Sethe’s bed and from her house. What he feels for her (“young enough to be his daughter”) is some “life-hunger,” more primal than desire. “She reminds me of something,” he thinks. “Something look like I’m supposed to remember” (234). And although he feels that he is lost if he acknowledges his connection to her, it is a loss that he must plumb if he is to find himself. When he responds finally to her plea—“I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name” (116)—“he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made . . . as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it” (117). What he experiences as an incestuous desire proves to be a profoundly renewing encounter: “[A]fterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (264). In the place before memory and desire—the place of primary narcissism which is only later marked as incest—he affirms the qualities in himself that have always made it possible for him to hear the secrets of women. Empathic still, but purged of fear, Paul D can now feel Sethe’s need without judging it by his own. On the other side of the mirror, he can bathe and hold her, knowing that “she is her own best thing,” “a friend of his mind,” and “the object of his desire” (273). And Sethe can accept Paul D’s story “next to” hers because she has not drowned in the “ocean-deep” place of her relation to *Beloved*: the place of abjection which is both the cause and, for the “others,” the result of the cultural psychosis of racism.

Sethe is saved from drowning, and her fantastic story given social shape, through the intervention of another maternal narrative: that of Baby Suggs. This narrative traces a path from the semiotic to the Symbolic that avoids the suffocating solipsism of abjection and pries open the appropriative cycle of the Imaginary. The movement is propelled by a fluid spirituality that refuses the religious codes of prohibition and taboo.<sup>19</sup> Like Sethe, Baby Suggs has beaten back her past, which, “like her present, had been

intolerable" (5). But little as she can remember of her children—all but Halle sold away—she knows still less about herself, since “she never had the map to discover what she was like” (140). When her freedom is bought by the loving labor of her son, she is finally able to possess her self, affirming a sense of “mine” that challenges the “mine” of Beloved and Sethe. She recognizes that the hands that have served others belong in fact to her, and she laughs with joy to hear, for the first time, her own heart beating. As an unchurched preacher, she lets that great heart beat in the presence of the community and makes of the Clearing a holy place. Mother-midwife, she restores the despised others to themselves by teaching them how to embrace their bodies, hearts, and minds, understanding that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (88). She recognizes them not only in their othernesses but also as a collectivity. The process of discovery which she initiates in them signifies itself not only in the call and response that sounds connection, but also through the pure expressiveness of the body and in the pleasures of the senses: in dance, in music, in laughter, and in tears, all shared in a ritual of inclusion. And while her teachings cannot prevent the jealousy and resentment that lead to Sethe’s betrayal, the images of this time persist, hidden in the minds of those to whom they once belonged. When thirty women respond to Denver’s need and come to save Sethe from the ghostly past that is destroying her, “the first thing that they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves” as the children they had been, “young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day” (258). For Sethe, who watches them arrive, “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” (261). The enactment of collective memory rooted in the semiotic transforms a timeless present into a future of possibilities by redeeming the past.

The knowledge which is identified in *Beloved* with this aspect of the maternal body, while primal, is powerfully enacted within history. It is an affective knowledge, more expressive than language and deeper than desire, that sustains Baby Suggs, despite despair, through her appetite for color. It is this same knowledge

that invests the words “Oh, baby,” spoken to Denver by Lady Jones, with a softness and kindness that “inaugurate[s] her life in the world as a woman” (248). With the others who give Denver food and facilitate, with their stories of Baby Suggs, the making of a past, Lady Jones provides another version of this maternal presence which allows relation in separateness. Hers is a knowledge shared by those who have few stakes in reproducing the power relations of the cultural Imaginary and Symbolic: black women most of all, but also black men like Paul D, Halle, and Stamp Paid, and all those others who, by extending the boundaries of community, refute implicitly the view that relations of otherness are necessarily oppositional. The territory of connection is identified early in the fiction when, at Denver’s birth, Amy and Sethe together enact a meaning that breaks the back of words: “. . . there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well . . . a slave and a barefoot white-woman with unpinned hair . . . wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. . . . The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well” (84–85).

The image of this scene, recalled repeatedly by Sethe and memorialized in Denver’s name, is the only social reference that Denver has until she steps off the edge of the world that is Sethe’s yard, to seek help for her mother and Beloved. Its social meaning is reaffirmed across three generations by Mrs. Bodwin, who finally rescripts Schoolteacher’s role when she performs her own “experiment,” educating Denver for college.

It is, then, the doubled figure of the black mother—for Sethe and Baby Suggs can be read in the tradition of the fantastic as twinned versions of the maternal presence—that Morrison uses to redefine the relation of romance and realism: the psychological and social. Refusing to cede precedence to one, she necessarily redefines the nature of both. By demonstrating how realism brings the translinguistic meanings of the semiotic into the coherent structures of the Symbolic, she also shows how the profound complexity of psychic life is historically formed and historically enacted. While Beloved must be sacrificed if Sethe is to be socially integrated, she continues to exist as do the images of all past events, “not just in rememory, but out there, in the world” (36):

the world of the cultural semiotic. Beloved's fantastic story is "not a story to pass on," for it can neither propel nor extend the narrative which it suffuses. At the end, although Beloved is "[d]isremembered and unaccounted for," she must remain always on the edge of evocation. As the novel teaches us so powerfully, the elusive erotics of connectedness necessarily underlies, as it potentially disrupts, the socially structured erotics of desire.

### Notes

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1. In his book *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as a genre and analyzes it in terms of the hesitation experienced by a person who is familiar with the laws of nature when he or she encounters a supernatural event. That feeling of hesitation can be resolved on the level of the uncanny (the supernatural explained) or the marvelous (the supernatural accepted), but in the case of the pure fantastic—*The Turn of the Screw* provides him an example—it is not resolved at all. Texts that induce this form of hesitation are, for Todorov, genuinely subversive in that they offer a sense of the transgression of boundaries, a shocking experience of limits. I follow Rosemary Jackson, rather than Todorov, in defining the fantastic not as a genre but as a literary mode of writing productive of a range of genres which themselves produce, regulate, and structure desire. With Jackson, I am interested in exploring the psychoanalytic implications of the fantastic, but I diverge from her in my concern for the ways in which the fantastic can help us to extend psychoanalytic readings to illuminate the relation of gender, race, and class to the construction of subjectivity.

2. One would include in a list of significant early gothic novels, for example, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*; or *The Transformation*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, and Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. While the genre of romance dominates the fantastic mode in the nineteenth century, the absurd might be said to represent the other side of modernism—which replaces the real—while magical realism represents the dominant, dark side of postmodernism.

3. Some of the relevant English texts in this category are *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Dracula*; in America, *Moby-Dick*, *Benito Cereno*, and the tales of Poe and Hawthorne.

4. For example, the stories of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* and the nun in *Villette*, and those of the criminals and sexually rebellious women throughout Dickens's novels.

5. In his book *Difference and Pathology*, Sander Gilman suggests that the deep structure of the stereotype is rooted in the individuation process when the child projects both a good and a bad self in order to reflect its sense of control or lack of control of the external world. These crude mental representations "perpet-

uate a needed sense of the difference between the 'self' and the 'object,' which becomes the 'other'" (18). The complexity of the stereotype derives from the social context in which it is elaborated.

6. I am referring here to: Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*; Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*; Carol Gilligan, *In Different Voice*; Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*; Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking."

7. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out in his essay "Critical Fanonism" that Fanon does tend to contradict himself in his discussion of the construction of black and white subjectivity, sometimes taking the Lacanian perspective, sometimes treating black and white as fixed phenomenological points, and indicating at least once that the Antillean looking in the mirror sees himself as "neutral" in color. Gates valuably demonstrates the ways in which various theorists (Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed, Gayatri Spivak, and Albert Memmi) have elaborated that aspect of Fanon's argument which can be used in support of their own.

8. In her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison comments on the shaping influence of blackness as a present absence in nineteenth-century romance. She identifies Melville with Ahab in recognizing and struggling heroically with the horrors of the ideology of whiteness. It seems to me that Morrison is clearly writing in this romantic tradition, rather than in the tradition of magical realism, as some have thought. Indeed, Morrison expresses her own suspicion of the use of "magical realism" as a label for her novels in an interview with Christina Davis in *Présence Africaine*.

9. Abdul JanMohamed has argued similarly that Homi Bhabha erases the significant inequities of colonialist practice in his emphasis on the reciprocal oppositions of the Imaginary. JanMohamed redefines the functioning of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in textual terms, however, without interrogating the psychoanalytic paradigm.

10. Stuart Hall writes: "The past that speaks is not simple and factual. Our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already after the break" (226).

11. For Freud, the primal fantasies (primal scene, castration, seduction) are all related to problems of origin, "a representation of and a 'solution' to whatever constitutes a major enigma for the child. Whatever appears to the subject as a reality of such a type as to require an explanation or 'theory,' these phantasies dramatise into the primal moment or original point of departure of a history. In the 'primal scene,' it is the origin of the subject that is represented; in seduction phantasies, it is the origin or emergence of sexuality; in castration phantasies, the origin of the distinction between the sexes" (LaPlanche and Pontalis 332).

12. See Jim Swann, "Mater and Nannie"; Jane Gallop, "Keys to Dora"; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "The Maid and the Family Romance."

13. Jane Gallop writes, "Class conflict and revolution are understood as a repetition of parent-child relations. This has always been the pernicious apoliticism of psychoanalysis. It has also been hard to argue against without totally rejecting psychoanalysis. . . . What is necessary to get beyond this dilemma is a recognition that the closed, cellular model of the family used in such psychoanalytic thinking is an idealization, a secondary revision of the family. The family never was, in any of Freud's texts, completely closed off from questions of economic class. And the most insistent locus of the intrusion into the family circle

(intrusion of the symbolic into the imaginary) is the maid/governess/nurse. As Cixous says, 'she is the hole in the social cell'" (144).

14. In her important book *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby documents the ways in which Afro-American women intellectuals both used and resisted the ideology of white womanhood that had othered them, in order to define a discourse of black womanhood that allowed them to reclaim a gendered subjectivity.

15. Hortense Spillers has argued in "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In-(pha)llibly Straight'" that the representation of incestuous desire in fictions about the black father and daughter speaks to the confusions that surround this relation as a result of the father's absence in slavery and in traditional black culture. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers also interrogates psychoanalytic theory by considering the effect of slavery on African-American kinship and gender structures, but the focus of her argument—and her conclusions—are quite different from my own.

16. See Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto.

17. See Claire Kahane.

18. As Kristeva describes it: "The abject is the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into the start of life, of new significance" (15).

Kristeva finds justification for her assertion of the centrality of the discourse of abjection in Freud's theorization of the sign as including acoustic, tactile, and visual images. While heterogeneity is contained in the Symbolic Order by the process of condensation which ensures the relation of word and visual image, Kristeva suggests that one can detect "an attempt at *direct semanticization* of acoustic, tactile, motor, visual, etc. coenesthesia" when condensation collapses, along with the oedipal triangle by which it is supported (53). Semanticization of this sort—present in everyday discourses and crucial in those of poetry and religion—belie Lacan's insistence upon the primacy of condensation in the signifying process, and suggest the desirability of revising the oedipal paradigm of subjectification which Lacan affirms as central.

19. Kristeva writes: "It is within that undecidable space, logically coming before the choice of the sexual object, that the religious answer to abjection breaks in: defilement, taboo, or sin" (48).

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