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Teacher: Mary Ann Edelstam

**The “Ghost in the Machine”: Framing the Deconstruction of
the American Literary Canon through *Beloved***

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Christine Kleinman Johansson
751105-5944
Vadsbro 5
77499 By Kyrkby
tel 0226-70120
eurolc@hotmail.com

Table of Contents

The Ghost in the Machine	3
The Subliminal Haunting of the Africanist Sub-text	9
<i>Title</i>	11
<i>Epigraph</i>	12
<i>In Medias Res</i>	15
A Ghost in the House	17
The “Africanist Presence”	19
Bridging the Realm	21
Slave (Catcher’s) Narrative	22
Shadow	24
<i>Sethe’s Narrative</i>	26
<i>Denver’s Narrative</i>	29
Pieces	31
A Story to Pass On	33
List of Works Cited	36

The Ghost in the Machine

Set during post-Civil War Reconstruction, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is centered around the narratives of a small community of ex-slaves and their struggle to obtain subjectivity in their new roles as 'free' Americans. Though the novel contains numerous themes, motifs and messages, the majority of criticism surrounding *Beloved* has concentrated on speculation as to the identity of the title character, and the function she is meant to play in the novel. Perplexed by the ambiguity of the mysterious young woman calling herself "Beloved" who initially appears to be the re-incarnated ghost child of Sethe's murdered baby daughter and then paradoxically begins to exhibit memories which cannot be applied to the baby ghost, literary critics and scholars have delegated the determination of an identity for Beloved to a realm of highest importance, and, for many critics, becomes the criterion upon which support or dismissal of the novel is founded. To see her simply as a ghost, one faction of criticism maintains, is to banish the novel to the domain of trivial 'low' gothic fiction, unworthy of critical notice. Yet to ignore the very apparent supernatural qualities of *Beloved's* title character, asserts another school of thought—to *not* see her as a ghost—is to view the novel escaping authorial control, thereby establishing further grounds for negating its importance. By centering itself around this motivating question, critical debate has managed to back itself into a corner, and there seems no easy way out of this conundrum. Unless, that is, a new method for viewing this mysterious "ghost" can be discovered, a method which would allow Beloved to take on multiple roles and still preserve her "ghostly" presence, while simultaneously permitting the novel to remain true to authorial intent. Turning away from the novel for a moment and focusing instead on Morrison's critical works, the key to unraveling the mystery of Beloved may finally be unearthed.

Toni Morrison has enjoyed a long-standing career not only as a novelist, but also as a literary theorist, and like many contemporary scholars of American literature, Morrison considers the controversial and motivating issue of canon reformation, how to modify what was once “the protected preserve of the thoughts and works and analytical strategies of whitemen” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 2) into a body of literature representative of the pluralistic society it arises from. Considering the “male part of the whitemale equation [to be] already deeply engaged” by feminist criticism, Morrison focuses instead on the presentation of race in the American literary canon. And though it might be said that the “white” part of the equation is also “already deeply engaged” by critical discourse, the position Morrison takes in this debate is rather unconventional.

Morrison’s theoretical discourse stems from a refutation of what she claims is

... a set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as ‘knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ holds that traditional, canonical literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the [...] presence of [...] African-Americans in the United States. [...] Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. (“Playing in the Dark” 924)

Though this “knowledge” is perhaps not so absolute as Morrison insists—few would deny that traditional, canonical works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or any number of Transcendentalist texts are not “informed” by an African American presence—Morrison’s observation is valid to the extent that most literary scholars would agree that the works of the traditional canon were neither written by, nor written for, African Americans, and rarely (and some would, perhaps, argue never) achieve a truly subjective representation of African American characters. Yet does this absence of African American voices within the traditional canon, Morrison challenges, presuppose the absence of an African American presence? Or might “these absences of vital presences in Young American literature [...] be the insistent fruit of the scholarship rather than the text” (“Unspeakable” 13). Might, she asks, the traditional canon that seems to be “‘naturally’ or ‘inevitably’ ‘white’” be in actuality only “studiously so”?

If these “absences” are only the “insistent fruit of the scholarship,” they have not necessarily been “unfruitful.” The recognition of an African American void in the traditional canon is, in point of fact, what has prompted the successful transformation of the traditional canon from what fifty years ago was a nearly exclusively white-male-authored body of works into a structure that now includes genres such as the Slave Narrative and the Harlem Renaissance. Yet making room for these new works has also meant a “censoring” of the traditional canon, the discarding of many established, time-honored works, and a taboo on the acknowledgement of racial matters in the works that are allowed to remain. Though this re-configuration is carried out with the intent of erecting a more representative and non-offensive canon, “a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only ‘universal’ but ‘race-free,’” Morrison states, “risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist” (“Playing” 927). Applauding the inclusion of African American voices into the canon, Morrison proposes that the canon reformation venture be one of expansion, and not replacement, for it is equally important, she maintains, to continue to study the traditional works of the canon, as they might prove to have “deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significances” than have been previously recognized (“Unspeakable” 14).

Maintaining, as Sture Allén summarized in Morrison’s Nobel Prize presentation speech, that “whiteness in literature [has] blackness as its constant companion, the racial other as its shadow” (Allén 1), Morrison proposes that in an effort to maintain a superficial facade as a “coherent entity” and establish the literature of the United States as a contending force in the world’s market, early American writers relied upon the construction of a shadow other of “literary blackness” to oppose and thereby define their own constructed first principle of “literary whiteness.” These shadowed manifestations of “blackness,” forming what Morrison coins “African Americanism” or the “Africanist presence,” are evidenced, she asserts, not only in the negative portrayal of black characters in early American literature, but also in literary devices such as dark or black symbolism, binary oppositions, “in the ways writers peopled their works with the signs and bodies of this [Africanist] presence” and in the “extraordinary

gaps and evasions and destabilizations,” “underscored omissions, startling contradictions, and heavily nuanced conflicts” that, she maintains, pervade and determine the founding works of the traditional American literary canon (Moyers 264, “Playing” 924).

Although Morrison does not explicitly quote the works of Jacques Derrida in her critical discourse, the tenants of his theories provide keen insights into Morrison’s speculations on this construction of the “Africanist presence.” According to Derridian philosophy, ideologies operate by erecting “an unassailable foundation, a first principle or unimpeachable ground upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings may be constructed” (Eagleton 114). The power of these “first principles” is then maintained through the construction of binary oppositions, oppositions such as black/white, right/wrong, good/bad, etc., the “negative” values of which are used to oppose and thereby define the “positive” ones. In the same manner, Morrison contends that the entire ideology of “Americanness” is dependant upon the first principle of “literary whiteness,” a first principle which has been maintained through the fabrication of its antithesis, “literary blackness.” Furthermore, she asserts that all of the “major and founding characteristics” of American literature are in fact “responses” to a “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (“Playing” 924), and that these characteristics have actually been formed by scapegoating their ‘opposites’ onto a constructed “Africanist presence.” Yet in the very act of constructing this “Africanist presence” through which to define itself in antithesis to, Morrison proposes, American literature has facilitated the deconstruction of its own founding ‘enlightenment’ principles.

Because a first principle, like any ‘sign’ or word, can only be defined by the other signs it excludes, then, according to Derridian theory, in every first principle can be detected, “even if only unconsciously, traces of the other words it has excluded in order to be itself” (Eagleton 111). Thus, the first principle supposed by the positive value of any binary opposition is saturated by the “traces” of its antithesis, subversive undertones which serve to prove how the power of the first principle is collapsed by its dependency on its negative value for definition. If the power of the first principle of “literary whiteness” that presides over American literature can therefore be shown to be collapsed by the traces of “literary

blackness” that inundate it, then critical discourse must, Morrison demands, initiate a quest to find these traces. And it is in the founding works of the traditional canon that she believes the quest should begin.

An examination of the early works of the canon, according to Morrison, reveals these texts to be plagued by a subversive “Africanist presence.” Existing anterior to the ‘conscious’ or main narrative of these works, these manifestations of “literary blackness,” she claims, form a subliminal, hidden, second narrative, an ‘unconscious’ sub-text that when identified, proves to reveal remarkable insight into the ways the early “white writerly conscious” dealt with the first principle of “whiteness idealized” (“Unspeakable” 17-18). She sees this subliminal text, for example, in “Hawthorne’s preoccupation with blackness” (Moyers 264), in Poe’s desperate attempts at ‘otherizing’ the Negro dialect, in Conrad’s “unspeaking” and D.H. Lawrence’s “uncreate” (“Unspeakable” 13, 9).

Yet even when the texts are subverted by an ‘unconscious’ sub-text, it does not necessarily follow that this sub-text was unconsciously constructed, nor that its design was always to “assert its antithesis to blackness.” In fact, she ventures, “[p]erhaps some [writers] were not so much transcending politics, or escaping blackness, as they were transforming it into intelligible, accessible, yet artistic modes of discourse” (14). One such writer, she notes, could be Herman Melville, whose *Moby Dick* might be seen to actually use the “Africanist presence” to address and question the “truth” of “whiteness idealized” through the novel’s “unspeakable [...] hidden course” (17-18). But regardless of whether these early authors used the concepts of “literary blackness” and “literary whiteness” consciously or unconsciously, negatively or positively, what begins to be apparent in an examination of early American literature, Morrison contends, is that virtually no work escapes determination by this “Africanist presence,” and the failure of theoretical discourse to have recognized this fact earlier only reflects a “willful critical blindness—a blindness that, if it had not existed, could have made these insights part of our routine literary heritage” (“Playing” 930).

Because these founding works have set the standard for how American literature is written, read, and judged today, Morrison insists, and even contemporary literature reveals

“the self-evident ways Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence, “ to be able to understand how—and why—“literary blackness” and “literary whiteness” have been allowed to function, it is imperative that critical discourse direct its attention to the works of the turbulent 1800’s—“the moment in America when whiteness became ideology” (“Unspeakable” 15). Thus, Morrison calls for

...an examination and re-interpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, for the “unspeakable things unspoken”; for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the *ghost in the machine* [... , an] active but unsummoned presence [...] that can distort the workings of the machine and can also make it work. (“Unspeakable” 11-13, emphasis added)

What Morrison is appealing for here is the deconstruction of nineteenth century canonized American literature to discover the hidden Africanist sub-texts that might reside within, and while this is an interesting and engaging concept, what makes this appeal even more interesting is her choice of the term “ghost” to describe these manifestations of literary blackness, and the clue it may present for unraveling her own “ghost story.” Could it be that Morrison is hinting at an alternate method for viewing the “ghost” which haunts 124 Bluestone in *Beloved*? Might the character of Beloved be seen to function in some way as a “ghost in the machine,” an Africanist presence constructed to allow the ideology of “whiteness idealized” to function, but which also subverts that ideology by the very nature of its own construction? Is this an intimation to “search” Morrison’s own ‘nineteenth century’ canonized novel for its “ghosts” and the deconstructive wrenches they might throw into the machinery of the American literary canon?

The Subliminal Haunting of the Africanist Sub-text

It might be argued that Morrison's contentions are overstated, oversimplified or even at times contradictory. On the other hand, it might be argued that they are wholly valid. The aim of this essay is neither to support or refute Morrison's theories, but rather to consider the possibility that Morrison might be submitting *Beloved* as a fictional re-iteration of her own theoretical discourse. That the novel, like Morrison's critical essays, might provide the framework for identifying and examining the "Africanist presence" in the founding works of the traditional American literary canon, yet be presenting these theories not in the complicated jargon of theory, but in an "intelligible, accessible, yet artistic mode of discourse."

If Morrison is, in fact, providing the answer to the enigma of *Beloved* by proscribing her an identity as a "ghost in the machine," then a reading of the novel, *Beloved*, takes on whole new dimensions. In no way meant to deter from Morrison's very real and intended identities for her character as Sethe's "child returned to her from the dead," and also "a survivor from a true, factual slave ship" (Darling 247), by allowing *Beloved* to function in an additional and subliminal context as a "ghost in the machine," Morrison sets up a subliminal narrative within the ruling narrative of the novel, an "underground" sub-text not unlike the ones she sees haunting the works of nineteenth century American literature.

Most criticism tends to classify *Beloved* as a contemporary revision of the typical nineteenth century slave narrative, and in many ways, this description is valid. The novel does devote a large portion of the text to Sethe's enslavement and escape from Sweet Home, and Morrison does use many of the stylistic tactics of the slave narrator. However, if one is to consider the actual characteristics and format of the novel, it becomes surprisingly apparent that *Beloved*, with its elements of the sentimental and supernatural, cannot reasonably be seen to fit into the Realism genre of the slave narrative, but instead is probably best classified as a Romantic novel. If one is to then further consider the fact that the Romantic novel was the very form that monopolized and defined nineteenth century canonical American literature, what becomes even more surprisingly apparent is that

Morrison has constructed a subliminal format beneath her revision of the nineteenth century slave narrative—a revision of the nineteenth century Romantic novel.

The ‘conscious’ narrative of *Beloved* is that of a slave narrative; it is that of a mother’s love for her child, of “the consequences of certain kinds of choices and the risks and benefits” of those choices (Washington 236). It is all the things that Morrison has claimed it is and all the things that *Beloved* scholars have brought to light. Yet underneath that ‘conscious’ text exists an ‘unconscious’ one, a subliminal narrative of a Romantic novel that serves as a model for the entire era of “founding, nineteenth century works” of the American literary canon. And it is within this ‘unconscious’ narrative that *Beloved*, in her subliminal identity as a “ghost in the machine,” can be seen to haunt, just as the works of the traditional, nineteenth century canon, Morrison insists, are haunted by the subliminal sub-text of the “Africanist presence.”

In constructing a ‘conscious’ format of a slave narrative to hover over this subliminal text in *Beloved*, several objectives are fulfilled. On the one hand, Morrison demonstrates how the horrors brought to light by the slave narrative contributed to the need for the “white writerly conscious” to construct an “Africanist presence.” Yet what these competing formats additionally serve to expose is the manner by which the slave narrative, itself a form of nineteenth century literature, though not part of the “traditional” canon, is also determined by the “Africanist presence.” Furthermore, by allowing this ‘conscious’ plot of a slave narrative to occupy the reader’s conscious readerly strategy, she allows a subliminal ‘slave narrative’ to enter the reader’s unconscious—the slave narrative of the “Africanist presence,” trapped within the confines of the American literary canon, waiting for Morrison to set it free and allow it to wreak deconstructive havoc on the canon. And in the tools Morrison uses to frame *Beloved* and introduce its “Africanist” character to the reader, she reveals how she will use these ruling and subliminal narratives to do just that.

Title

The first and most visibly foremost of these tools is the title itself. Evocative of romance, of sentimentality, the word 'beloved' belies what the reader knows from a glance at the back cover to be a novel about slavery. This unsettling contradiction parallels the literary situation in the United States on the eve of the Civil War, a milieu in which the romance novel, and especially the sentimental romance novel, virtually monopolized American literature.

Morrison considers the question of why, at the "height of slavery and burgeoning abolitionism, American writers chose [sentimental] romance [and wonders where] in these romances is the shadow of the presence from which the text has fled?" ("Unspeakable" 12). Where, in other words, is the "ghost in the machine?"

If one were to begin reading *Beloved* a few pages in, when Sethe returns from the chamomile fields to find Paul D waiting on the steps of 124, and then skip ahead to the next-to-last chapter, what one would find is the beginning and end of a bittersweet, sentimental romance. Yet the actual opening and closing of the novel, and their emphases on the haunting of 124, subvert the romance between Paul D and Sethe to a sub-plot. Just as the mere mention of 124's ghost breaks up the "twosome" Paul D and Sethe were becoming (*Beloved* 13), the nineteenth-century Romance novel, according to Morrison, is disrupted and negated by the subversive presence of the 'Africanist' specter. By titling the novel, and its Africanist "ghost," "Beloved," Morrison exposes the hidden agenda of this era in American fiction, whose submerged "ghosts in the machine" undermine their surface objectives.

This hidden/exposed dichotomy apparent in the novel's title takes on new dimensions in an etymological analysis of the word "beloved." On the surface, the origins and definitions of this word elicit no surprises—they reveal the word to contain only its expected meaning of "someone who is loved." It is, rather, in the etymology of another word that the deconstructive designs of this title become apparent—the word "free." Originating from the Old English *freon* or *freogan*, the "primary sense [of the word] seems to have been 'beloved, friend, to love,' which [...] developed also a sense of 'free,' perhaps from the terms 'beloved' or 'friend' being applied to the free members of one's clan (as opposed to slaves)" (*Online*

Etymology Dictionary, “free”). By titling the novel, and its central character (an ex-slave), “Beloved,” Morrison challenges the binary opposition of freedom/slavery that allows the white writerly conscious to proceed from a pretense of non-accountability following the Civil War emancipation of the slaves, when in fact its construction of an “Africanist presence” in American literature furthered, and in some ways heightened, the enslavement of the African American.¹

Like the traditional slave narrative, within which “verbal sparring allowed [...] renegotiating the meaning of evocative words like ‘freedom’, ‘master’, or ‘religion’ while exposing the hidden power base underlying conventional usage” (Hamilton 433), Morrison uses the “verbal sparring” inherent in this discordant title to refute the ideology that insists that “definitions belong[...] to the definers—not the defined” (*Beloved* 190). Dividing the signifier from the signified, Morrison uses her novel’s title to deconstruct the “hidden power base” inherent in the first principle of American “freedom,” a first principle that relies on the negative value of “slavery” to define itself.

Epigraph

The full deconstructive ramifications of the novel’s title becomes apparent when it is viewed in connection with the epigraph, which reads:

*I will call them my people,
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.*

ROMANS 9:25

This introduction to the novel has been a source of contention for many *Beloved* scholars, for it appears to contradict itself and put into question the identities of all of the novel’s characters, and especially of Beloved. Elizabeth House, in her essay, “Toni Morrison’s Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved,” for example, uses this epigraph to support her conclusion that Beloved is no relation to Sethe or Denver (“not my people”), and therefore

¹ See *Unspeakable* (14), where Morrison discusses the Africanist presence in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and “the connection Melville made between American slavery and American freedom, how heightened [sic] the one rendered the other.”

not the “Beloved” they think she is when they “call” her name (House 22). Yet this theory is refuted by Morrison’s own numerous and well-documented affirmations that Beloved is, at least in one of her manifestations, the ghost of Sethe’s daughter.² What these lines do suggest to the reader, however, is an injunction to read *Beloved* against the grain, to be receptive to the “deeper and other significances” that might lie below the surface structure of the novel. To be open to the idea that Beloved might not be *only* who she appears to be, but that aside from her established identities as the ghost of Sethe’s daughter or as a slave ship survivor, she may also be seen within deeper and more symbolic parameters. That this ghost may, in fact, take on a subliminal identity as a “ghost in the machine,” and in so doing, re-define not only the identities of the other characters, but of all the “people” affected by American literature.

An appeal to these “deeper significances” finds validation even in a closer look at the epigraph itself, which can be seen to reveal an intent to deconstruct the “claims at universality” of the American Literary canon. Calling again upon the etymological definition of “free” referenced in the previous section, the epigraph can be read something like this: “I will call them ‘friend,’ or members of my clan / who are in actuality slaves and not clan / and I will call her free / who is not free.” Denying the existence of this Africanist presence in its works allows the “arbiters of power in American literature” (“Playing” 928) to present the canon as “universal” and “race-free.” In doing so, they impart to American literature the presumed right to speak for “othered” groups such as African Americans and to include them into its “sense of Americanness,” in effect, to call them “my people.” Yet by assuming that “the characteristics of [American] literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to” the African American presence, they are in fact proclaiming that this group is “not my people,” and enforce this stance by demanding what Morrison describes as “the silence of the black person” (Moyers 262). The practice that dictates the subject of ‘race’ be treated with “silence and evasion” in literary discourse

² See Darling (247), Moyers (272), Caldwell (242).

(“Playing” 926) succeeds merely in proscribing an invisibility to a presence which is, in fact, Morrison insists, visible in the “linguistic gestures [that provide] a full descriptive apparatus [...] to a presence-that-is-assumed-not-to-exist” (“Unspeakable” 19). Calling this presence “beloved” or “free” when it is, yet, neither of these things, Morrison reveals that she will attempt through the framework of *Beloved* to free the canon’s “ghosts in the machine” from their silenced, enslaved confines and allow them to enter conscious discourse.

Another deconstructive objective of the epigraph becomes apparent by considering the origins of the quote itself. In introducing *Beloved* with this Biblical verse, Morrison provides a medium for questioning of the first principle of Christianity that presides over both the culture and the literature of the United States. Quoting scripture for her own purposes, Morrison follows the pattern of the slave narrator and uses the tool of the oppressor against himself to undermine the subversive tactics of the ruling white protestant culture of the United States, which can often be seen to selectively twist Christian ideology to further its own objectives.

One of the most notorious distortions of Biblical verse in this manner can be seen in the justification of slavery through the “curse of Ham,” in which biblical ‘precedent’ and divine right are assumed for the ‘continued’ enslavement of African peoples.³ Renouncing the authority of Christian ideology to ‘define’ a justification for slavery, Morrison asserts the right of the defined to re-appropriate its own definition and proclaims that these cursed descendants of Ham are not, in fact, her “people.” Yet in assuming the authority, as a member of this ‘cursed’ race, to redefine its defining sign within her own parameters—to *choose* to call them her people while renouncing the right of the ruling culture to make that choice for her—she takes the power away from the signifier and places it in the hands of the signified.

The final two lines of the verse further this objective by revealing the manner by which the first or founding principles of Christian ideology and male superiority have contributed to

³ The primary citation for this “curse” is Genesis 9:25-7, in which Noah, angered at some indiscretion of his son Ham, curses Ham’s son Canaan and all his descendants to eternal slavery. Because Ham was supposed to be black, and because Canaan’s descendants were believed to have settled in Africa, this biblical reference was used to justify the “divine right” to enslave Africans.

the construction and signification of an Africanist presence within American literature. At no place in the novel, *Beloved*, do we learn its title character's true name. Instead, this Africanist persona is forced to bear the sign hung by her oppressors. As the "slave ship survivor," she receives her name from the white slave traders who sexually abuse her, calling her "beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" (*Beloved* 241). As the ghost-child of Sethe's daughter, her signification as "Beloved," ("not her given name" (208)), transpires from the opening words of Reverend Pike's funeral invocation, "Dearly Beloved," and is inscribed on her headstone by a white man, the engraver who demands sex with Sethe for payment for his services.

This 'naming' of Beloved parallels the misrecognition and missignification of "American Africanism" in American literature. Just as "Beloved's" true name is denied her, the true identity of "American Africanism" is subverted by the refusal of critical discourse to recognize and "name" it for what it is. And just as Beloved is required to bear the cruel joke of a name that is the representation of everything she is not: "beloved" and "free," by insisting that American literature is "universal" and "race-free," the "Africanist presence" in the canon is forced to carry the label of its antithesis, its missignification etched onto the walls of the canon by the "white writerly conscious" just as Beloved's contrived name is carved by the white male engraver onto her headstone. By insisting that she will "call her beloved, which was not beloved," Morrison exposes how the binary oppositions used to uphold the missignification of the "Africanist presence" are collapsed by their dependency upon each other for definition.

In Medias Res

While the typical slave narrative follows a linear "slavery, escape, journey to freedom" structure, Morrison chooses to submit her contribution to the genre in a circular format, beginning the novel *in medias res*, eighteen years after Sethe's escape, and then slowly unveiling the details of her enslavement and "journey to freedom" through stream-of-conscious reminiscences from the characters. In opposition to the typical linear slave

narrative that arrives at a presumption of “freedom” for the slave, Morrison’s circular format questions this presumption of “freedom” and the sort of linear reasoning that permits it.

Viewed from one perspective, the entry of the lineal slave narrative into the American literary canon in the 1960’s represents the emancipation of the African American voice and the dawning of hope for a more ‘representative’ body of American literature. Looked at in another way, this belated inclusion of an early black voice permits the canon of American literature to adopt a founding facade of “universality” while remaining safe in the “knowledge” that the real, “traditional” canon is “uninformed” by an African American presence. Simultaneously, it allows critical discourse to present a linear rationalization of the African American experience—“slavery to freedom”—and then dismiss that experience as a ‘concluded’ narrative that has no bearing on the rest of the nation’s literature.

This presumption of authority to define “knowledge,” according to Derridian philosophy, is typical of the metaphysical nature of Western thought, which “claims to speak for reason, truth, and knowledge, but [which] in fact consists of violent acts of opposition and hierarchization, value judgments that unjustifiably subordinate one set of terms and privilege another” (Ryan 72). Yet the sort of linear or “rational” reasoning that seeks to rationalize and present a concept or thought as “truth” or “knowledge” undermines its own claims of authority through its very structure of linearity.

Since “truth” is defined as “the presence of ideas in the mind” (72), then a claim to “speak for truth” presumes the reality of a definite realm of “presence” where ideas exist as “knowledge,” and where conscious thought is undetermined and unplagued by unconscious thought. But because thought and reasoning are bound up in language, and language is a temporal process, “such a concept or idea [as “knowledge” or “truth”] can exist only in a kind of movement of temporalization, moving from past to present to future” (Rivkin and Ryan 340), with each ‘signified’ caught up in a chain of ‘signifiers’ and each ‘conscious’ thought determined by the ‘unconscious’ traces that propel it along the chain. Thus, the idea that “truth” or “knowledge” can ever be present in the mind is a fiction, a fiction revealed by the

very linearity of the language and reasoning which attempts to locate itself in the realm of “presence.”

In presenting the assumption that American literature is “uninformed” or “free from” the presence of African Americans as “knowledge,” the arbitrators of power in American literature only reveal the metaphysical nature of the canon that attempts to define “truth” through “value judgments” of constructed binary oppositions like “whiteness/blackness” or “freedom/slavery.” By denouncing the tyranny of the linear time dimension in favor of a circular, *in medias res* format and stream-of-conscious narrative, *Beloved* exposes the fallacy inherent in these claims at “truth” through linear reasoning, and illuminates how the “knowledge” of African American invisibility in the canon is subverted by the unconscious sub-text of its Africanist presence.

A Ghost in the House

If the circularity of *Beloved* suggests that the attainment of freedom in the typical slave narrative is a fiction, then by reserving the opening lines of *Beloved* for the house, Morrison proposes that the “freedom” attained with emancipation of the slave may have only effected re-enslavement in another form. While the ruling narrative of the novel provides an account of Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home, by reserving the opening sentence of *Beloved* for the house, “124 was spiteful” (*Beloved* 3) Morrison is, in effect, constructing a slave narrative within a slave narrative, placing subliminal emphasis on Sethe and Denver’s fugitive state within 124 *after* their escape from slavery, and on the enslavement of the “Africanist presence” within the walls of the canon.

In “Haunting Houses, Sinking Ships,” Samira Kawash notes that, “American literature frequently figures the nation as a house haunted by the national shame or repressed trauma of slavery” (Kawash 3). If, with *Beloved*, Morrison is offering a subliminal account of the haunting of American literature by the Africanist “ghost in the machine,” then 124 Bluestone might very well serve as a symbol not only of the nation but also of its literary canon, and the

enslavement of African American subjectivity within it through the construction and enslavement of its “Africanist presence.”

The ghost of “Beloved” does not begin haunting 124 immediately after her death. It is only when Sethe gets “the gravestone in place [that the ghost] made her presence known in the house and worried us all to distraction” (*Beloved* 184). Just as the refusal to identify and name the black presence that signifies American literature, Morrison maintains, traps the Africanist presence as an invisible apparition within the canon, the refusal to call “Beloved” by her true name traps her spirit within the house, and she, in turn, effects the enslavement of 124’s African American inhabitants. From the erection of Beloved’s headstone to the arrival of Paul D, Sethe and Denver live in this prison, where the narratives of their past lives were considered “unspeakable” (58).

However, with Paul D’s battle of the “ghost,” the situation in the house becomes irrevocably altered. If Morrison’s postulations that

...the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are [...] in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.... (“Playing” 924)

can be seen to be valid, then Paul D’s battle and exorcism of 124’s ghost might be read within symbolic parameters. Grabbing a table as his agenda and battering ram, Paul D praises “Good God,” sets his “loud male voice” of masculine authority in a solitary duel against the “evil” ghost to save the women of the house from their “historical isolation,” and “rids 124 of its local claim to fame” (*Beloved* 37). Yet it is not long before the ghost he exorcises returns in a physical manifestation. In attempting to assert authority and dominance by placing the founding principles of American literature in binary “opposition” to the negative values scapegoated onto “literary blackness,” “things became what they were” (39), and the ghost is revealed not as an invisible presence, but an actual one that “shaped the body politic” of the nation (“Playing” 924).

The “Africanist Presence”

When *Beloved* manifests herself physically, the obscured characteristics of the “ghost in the machine” come into focus—all of the stereotypes, negative images, gaps and silences that make up the Africanist presence. Described as having “midnight skin” (*Beloved* 250), “thunderblack” (261) and “black as oil” (235), she becomes an exaggeration of “literary blackness,” an exaggeration that, Morrison maintains, is necessary for the heightening of “literary whiteness.” She is childlike, like a “ridiculously dependant child,” with “flawless skin,” “sleepy eyes” and the wobbly legs of a toddler (51-57). She is illiterate (52), and unintelligent, with “no expression at all” (55) in her eyes, and unable even to articulate that she can’t tie a knot (“the shoe strings don’t fix” (65)) let alone do it. She is deceitful—claiming that she walked “a long, long, long way” yet has no marks on either her shoes or her feet—and even criminal, “I take the dress. I take the shoes” (65). She is sexually promiscuous and morally ambiguous, ‘seducing’ Paul D, and going about the house naked. Finally, though everything else about her development seems to be stunted, and she can hardly walk, she possesses a remarkable innate (learned “nowhere”) ability to dance (74), reflecting the perhaps not so negative, but no less damaging for that, stereotype of the African American as entertainer.

The enigmas and omissions that make up the narrative of *Beloved*’s past exemplify the “extraordinary gaps and evasions and destabilizations” that Morrison notes in the “Africanist presence” in works of nineteenth century American literature. To any question about her past, *Beloved* gives only vague, obscure and often contradictory answers, and neither the characters nor the reader are ever completely sure who—or what—*Beloved* really is. Discussing the character in an interview, Morrison states, “I couldn’t get *Beloved*’s voice [...]. She was there, but she couldn’t say anything” (Caldwell 243). This voicelessness represents “the silence of the black person” that “literary whiteness” has depended on to maintain “literary blackness.” Yet even though the “Africanist presence” might not have a “voice,” it is nevertheless able to “write back,” Morrison reveals, if only one knows where to look.

While *Beloved* is disclosed to the characters in the novel only through what she chooses to tell them, the reader is privy to the thought narratives of *Beloved*'s soliloquy chapter (*Beloved* 210-213), and in the chapter she shares with Sethe and Denver (214-217). If *Beloved* can be seen to be a representation of the Africanist presence, then these thought narrative chapters can be shown to represent the unconscious subtext of the African presence at work in canonized texts. Existing anterior to the 'conscious' narrative of the novel, the narrative that the characters of a work exist in, this sub-text can only be "read" by the reader.

In the first of these chapters, *Beloved* begins by describing a scene from her childhood, yet stops in mid-thought and exclaims, "how can I say things that are pictures?" (210). Expressing her frustration at not being able to "say" things that are "pictures," *Beloved* exposes the alterity of this sub-text, a sub-text that is evidenced not by the conscious presentation of the dominant narrative, but by the unconscious imagery it produces.

In the final chapter of the book, the narrator writes that eventually, even those that had spoken to [*Beloved*], lived with her, fallen in love with her [...] 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. [...] So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream. (*Beloved* 274-5)

Though *Beloved*'s words are lost, what she "said" remains, revealed through these private, "unspeakable" thoughts of the characters, through the stream-of-(un)conscious narrative of *Beloved*'s soliloquy chapters, through the omissions and incongruencies of her past, and through the memories she invokes in the other characters. The narrative of the "Africanist presence" in the works of American literature is subliminal, subversive and obscured, existing not in the 'conscious' narrative, but only 'unconsciously,' like the "unpleasant dream" of *Beloved*. Yet by choosing to "read" this narrative, what becomes apparent is not only the ways this unconscious "dream" affects the conscious objectives of the work, but also that "the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" ("Playing" 929-30). When Paul D, who spent

months with *Beloved* and was even physically intimate with her, remarks that “all I ever heard [Beloved] say was something about stealing her clothes and living on a bridge” (*Beloved* 235), he reveals not only how the narrative of the “Africanist presence” is banished from the realm of consciousness to unconsciousness, ‘self’ to ‘other,’ but also how this presence can be shown to “bridge” these realms.

Bridging the Realm

Throughout the novel, *Beloved* repeatedly refers to the “bridge” she was on, the bridge she came to be on “after [she] got out” (119) and before she came to 124. If, by this statement, *Beloved* is delineating the time between the removal of the ghost from the house and the arrival of the corporeal *Beloved* to 124, then this “bridge” can also be read as the link between the “lonely and rebuked” (13) “ghost” of “literary blackness” and an actual, recognized “Africanist presence.” In constructing an “Africanist presence,” Morrison asserts, founding American literature has attempted to erect an ‘other’ to oppose and thereby define its ‘self’ or “sense of Americanness,” yet by recognizing this as a desperate act of construction and ‘othering,’ what becomes apparent is not the polarity of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ but the inherence of the one within the other.

In *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton discusses the practice of ‘othering’ and writes:

... one reason why such exclusion is necessary is because [the other] may not be quite so other after all. Perhaps [it] stands as a sign of something in [the thing itself] which [it] needs to repress, expel beyond [its] own being, relegate to a securely alien region beyond [its] own definitive limits [...and...] police the absolute frontier between the two realms as vigilantly as [it] does just because it may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed already, and is much less absolute than it appears. (Eagleton 115)

“Literary whiteness,” like any first principle, becomes wholly dependant upon its negative value, not only as an expression of what it is not, and therefore “an essential reminder of what [it] is” (115), but also because the necessity of exclusion presupposes an origination of ‘inclusion’—reveals that what needs to be ‘othered’ does so by virtue of the fact that it is something within the thing itself which needs to be repressed. As the confrontational opposition of the foremost characteristics of American literature frees *Beloved* from her

ghostly manifestation and allows her to be seen as an “actual presence,” she bridges the “absolute frontier” American literature has erected between the realms of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ “whiteness” and “blackness,” and reveals not only that this border is a mirage, but that what it attempts to keep out is only what is already there.

Slave (Catchers’) Narrative

If Morrison’s postulations are correct, and the literature of nineteenth century “Young America” is determined by its construction of the “Africanist presence,” then it might be worthwhile to consider the ways the traumatic splitting of the nation with the Abolitionist movement and the Civil War might have effected a splitting of the ‘psyche’ of the nation—a splitting not only of North and South, Abolitionist and slavers, but also of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness.” As the atrocities of slavery are brought to light through the slave narrative, the “white writerly conscious” is forced into recognition of its own agency and responsibility for these horrors. Presented with the trauma of this responsibility, but not prepared, or willing to consciously confront it, its recognition is driven underground, and the desperate attempt to re-appropriate white “authority” becomes signified by the construction and ‘othering’ of “literary blackness.”

In *Beloved*, this re-appropriation can be seen to be symbolized by the slave catchers’ narration of “the Misery.” While up to this point in *Beloved*, all events have been told through the point of view of the black characters, the chapter detailing the events of Sethe’s murder of her children unfolds through the eyes of the slave catchers, and the ‘slave narrative’ mutates into the ‘slave catchers’ narrative.’

The journey of the “four horsemen” (*Beloved* 148) up Bluestone Road and into Baby Suggs’ yard marks this apocalyptic moment in the fortunes of both 124 and American literature. As the slave catchers ride up and surround the house, the narrative is filled with extraordinarily derogatory terminology (“nigger,” “pickaninnies,” “creatures,” “coons,” “cannibal,” etc.), used in such abundance, in fact, that it becomes testimony to the need for these men to repeat and reinforce the signification of African Americans as “inhuman,” or

“animal” in order to be able to justify to themselves the right to “capture” them. Yet as the gruesome scene unfolds before them, and as the schoolteacher becomes caught in the gaze of the ‘other’, Sethe, a gap in this terminology ensues.

Where Stamp was before “the old nigger boy,” now he is referred to in schoolteacher’s thought narrative as a “man;” where Sethe was before a “breeding” “nigger woman,” now she is just “the woman.” The nephew, watching Sethe, begins shaking, and the realization of his own agency in the crime, and of the subjectivity of the woman he had “nursed,” becomes evidenced in his words, “But no beating ever made him . . . I mean no way could he have . . .” Backing out of the shed, the slave catchers avoid the eyes of all the black onlookers, eyes that, if looked into, might reveal a subjectivity which would force them to admit responsibility for the tragedy. And with the recognition of the subjectivity and humanity of these African American people, they would be forced to have to admit their own inhumanity in attempting to enslave them. By avoiding their eyes, the slave catchers avoid this responsibility, just as the reader of this narrative, only by looking away from the exhibition of “American Africanism” between the lines of this chapter, can avoid the responsibility for its detection.

The ‘conscious’ narrative of this episode in the novel reveals an usurpation of authority by the white author, and though the reader later receives Sethe’s, Baby Suggs’ and Stamp Paid’s versions of the events, the original version, and the authority inherent in the original version of any tale, is denied the black participants of the episode and given instead to the white observers. This assumption of white writerly authority is further evidenced by Stamp Paid’s newspaper clipping of the woodshed killing. Choosing to present this newspaper article, written by a white, second-hand observer, to the illiterate Paul D, and then *reading* him its tale instead of giving Paul D his own first-hand account of the events, Stamp unwittingly legitimizes the prerogative of the white writer to assume control over the black narrative. Yet Paul D’s reaction to the article and its accompanying picture question that assumed prerogative. In asserting “that ain’t her mouth” (154), Paul D rejects the information

provided by the newspaper article, and in doing so rejects the “authority” of its white author and the narrative he has taken from his African American subject.

While this reaction represents how the ‘reader’ might refute “white writerly” authority, an inclusion into the slave catchers’ narrative itself exposes how this authority is originally removed by the “white writerly conscious” itself. When “a shadow behind [the sheriff] in the doorway made him turn” (151), the slave catchers’ narrative of the events ends, and the voice of the narrative switches to the point of view of its African American participants. By constructing the scene in this manner, Morrison sets up a framework for realizing how the “entrance” of the shadow of “literary blackness” into a narrative of “literary whiteness” undermines *its own* assumption of authority.

Shadow

The euphemism Morrison uses to describe the construction of an Africanist presence or “literary blackness” to oppose “literary whiteness”—“shadowing”—is deliberate and revealing. Consider the characteristics of a shadow. A shadow both reveals and reflects its subject. Depending on the direction of illumination, a shadow can be exaggerated or diminished, yet if one is aware of the direction of illumination, the exact dimensions of a subject are revealed through its shadow. It can anticipate the actions of the subject (for example, coming around a corner), or track its subject. A shadow is one-dimensional, featureless, obscured. It has no agency of its own, but is always required to carry out the actions initiated by its subject. Its actions are the exact opposite of its subject (if a subject raises its right hand, the shadow will raise its left), yet the actions themselves are otherwise identical. In literature and theory, the shadow is often used as a symbol for the unconscious or for the alter ego of a subject—who or what the subject believes it is not. Under the dictionary heading, “shadow,” one will inevitably discover “ghost” or “spirit” as one of its definitions.

After the exorcism of Beloved from 124, Sethe, Paul D and Denver escape the confines of 124 for an outing to the carnival. As they walk, Sethe notices that although “they were not holding hands, [...] their shadows were” and attributes this as a “good sign” of what could be

“a life” for this new “family” (47). Yet in following the characters from 124 and “leading them home” (49), what may instead be represented by these “handholding shadows” is the “shadowing” of “blackness” by American literature and the foreshadowing of the shadowed Africanist presence which waits for them on their return.

As Sethe, Paul D and Denver “rounded the curve in the road all they saw was a black dress, two unlaced shoes below it, and Here Boy nowhere in sight” (51). Like a shadow anticipating the arrival of its subject round a corner, what meets the characters as they round the curve is the shadowed “blackness” of their own subjectivity as African Americans, personified in the “Africanist presence” of *Beloved*. And yet, paradoxically, it is not she they see at all, but only a dress, shoes and the absence of the dog, for the “rays of the sun struck her full on the face” and make it impossible for the others to see her features.

What these “rays” might be seen to represent is the linear, “rational” reasoning of the white American writerly conscious, which constructs binary oppositions such as light/dark or whiteness/blackness to maintain a “faceless” objectivity for the African American. Yet just as it is, Morrison asserts, “through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ [that] the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness’” may be found, (“Playing” 926), what becomes illuminated by the metaphysical “rays” of American literature is not only the shadowing of the African American subject, but also the frailty of the structure that projects the shadow.

Representing the ultimate of Africanist ‘othering’—“blackness” and femininity—the “black dress” signifies the negative values that have come to define the two of the most major first principles of American literature—“whiteness” and masculinity. Yet like any metaphysical thinking, which can “always be deconstructed [to show it to be] products of a particular system of meaning rather than what props it up from outside” (Eagleton 114), the negative values exemplified by the “black dress” that “props” this Africanist presence up can be deconstructed to reveal them to only be products of the white dominant society she has “taken” the dress from.

Throughout the novel, shoes are used as a symbol of white dominance and power, over the slaves of Sweet Home, who had none (*Beloved* 222), and over Baby Suggs, whose

fleeting emancipation is undermined by the cobbetry she is required to carry out for the Bodwins, a 'slavery' Denver unconsciously realizes she is doomed to repeat by the "sadness" of the "dream about a running pair of shoes" that plagues her the night before she is to start work for the Bodwins (257). When the sheriff takes Sethe away after "the Misery," Baby starts to go after Sethe, but is stopped by the arrival of two children coming to bring her shoes to mend. Holding them "by their tongues" (153), the arrival of these shoes prevents Baby from "screaming, No. No" as she had planned to do, and represents the exercising of control over the African American voice by white "authority." The shoes that replace the image of Beloved, however, are "unlaced," representing the "unlacing" or the deconstruction of this assumed power that a recognition of the shadowing of "literary blackness" might evoke.

As Sethe runs from the image of schoolteacher and his pupils inscribing her "animal characteristics" into their "book," Sethe sees "one of the dogs" (193) of Sweet Home and this image comes to represent to Sethe her own bestial signification by these 'scholars.' In "Here Boy," the dog of 124, is symbolized the bestiality, the servitude, and the namelessness imposed on the African American subject by the construction of the "Africanist presence." Yet the arrival of this "shadowed" Africanist presence effects the disappearance of Here Boy. What the absence of the dog exposes is the power of the Africanist presence to deconstruct the power plays that "literary whiteness" uses to signify its presence, and show how it is, in fact, "literary blackness" that signifies "literary whiteness." With this recognition, the black narratives that have been lost to the Africanist presence are brought to light.

Sethe's Narrative

"The moment she got close enough to see the face" of this presence, Sethe experiences an "unmanageable" need to urinate, and, while doing so, compares herself to "a horse," but then immediately corrects herself, thinking, "No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born (51). These entwining images of bestiality and motherhood call to mind

Sethe's own "slave narrative," and the manner by which it, like the typical nineteenth century slave narrative, is determined by the "Africanist presence."

Like many slave narrators, Sethe is forced to hide her identity under a pseudonym ("Lu"), and the assumption of a name/voice results in a subversion and devaluation of her own (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 98). A similar effect is produced in the narration of her story by Denver, which parallels the second-hand narration of many slave narratives by white writers. Furthermore, because the slave narrative attempted to remain as true to reality as popular taste would allow, it was forced to reveal oppressive, "privately shameful" (*BeLoved* 61) memories, memories like Amy's words to Sethe, "What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?" (33). Though terminology such as this is included in slave narratives to expose the inhumanity of the subjugation of African Americans by whites, by writing it into American literature, what is also effected is a furthering of "literary blackness," a furthering of the "views, assumptions, readings and misreadings" that make up the "Africanist presence" ("Playing" 925). Yet as 124's "ghost" is forced into a physical manifestation by the violence of the attempt to set this "Africanist presence" in opposition to "literary whiteness," the full nature of the shadowing of "literary blackness" is illuminated.

Sethe's reaction to seeing *BeLoved's* face parallels the outcome an examination of "literary blackness" might produce. Pulling this presence from the obscurity enforced by the "rays" of the metaphysical reasoning of the canon, what becomes apparent first is the construction of this presence in American literature, and then its deconstruction. When Sethe sees *BeLoved* and compares herself to a "horse," she is recalling not only Amy's hurtful words, but also her own signification by schoolteacher, who refers to her as "the breeding one," and to Denver as "her foal" (*BeLoved* 227). However, in replacing this bestial signification with one of motherhood, Sethe asserts her own humanity, and in doing so, reveals her signification by schoolteacher only to be a powerful reflection on his own humanity, and more importantly, his own inhumanity.

Setting out, with his notebooks and "measuring string" to discover and inscribe the "animal characteristics" of the slaves of Sweet Home into his "book" (37), schoolteacher

represents the “white writerly conscious” in its construction of “literary blackness.” As he instructs his pupils to put Sethe’s “human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (193), schoolteacher exposes how this construction of “literary blackness” is wholly dependant upon the metaphysical fabrication of binary oppositions, oppositions that must “line up” as well as remain on their own “side” if the mirage of “truth” or “knowledge” is to remain in place. Yet when the nephew accidentally mixes up this rigid format, starts writing the wrong characteristic on the wrong side of the paper, he reveals how unconscious traces are always at work within the very structure of a binary opposition, traces which bring about the structure’s own deconstruction.

The attempt of the white writer to impose a bestiality on the African American subject through “Africanism” only reveals “the projection onto blacks, as a justification for slavery, of an entirely white-invented animality” (Brogan 79), a bestiality that is recognized within its own ‘self’ and projected onto the African American ‘other’ in a desperate attempt to regulate it from its being. In *Beloved*, this construction of the “Africanist presence” is symbolically described by Stamp Paid’s thought-narrative soliloquy about the “jungle” “whitepeople believed was under every dark skin” (*Beloved* 198-199).

Planting this “jungle” allows the “white writerly conscious” to justify its own inhumane treatment of the African American subject by setting up a binary opposition between the “inhumanity” of African Americans and the “humanity” of white Americans. But this Africanist “jungle” planted by the white writerly conscious, Stamp notes, “spread until it invaded the whites who had made it,” until it reveals that “the screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.” And though “the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks’ jungle was hidden, silent,” trapped within the walls of the canon of American literature, “once in a while [...] you could hear its mumbling in places like 124.”

With *Beloved*’s physical presence in the house, the “undecipherable language [of the] mumbling of the black and angry dead” (198) begins to be heard emanating from 124, and

... 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. (*Beloved* 199)

What these “voices that ringed 124 like a noose” (183) might represent are the voices of the African American narratives that are lost to the “Africanist presence” in American literature. Recognizing this “ghost” as an actual presence is not enough, for though the women in 124 can “be” and “say” what they liked, it is only “almost.” The narratives that were “unspeakable” when *Beloved* was just a “ghost” are still “unspeakable” and “unspoken” when she becomes an actual presence. Though *Beloved* brings out these narratives, grows “bigger and plumper by the day” (239) as they are “fed” to her, they remain trapped inside the house, just as these lost narratives remain trapped inside the canon of American literature until literary discourse opens the door to their study. The responsibility for opening this “door,” it would seem, lies in the hands of the succeeding generation of these narratives, represented in *Beloved* by Denver.

Denver's Narrative

When Denver sees the mysterious apparition on the stump outside 124, she reacts by asking, “What is that?” (51). In this revealing choice of words—by asking “what” and not “who” this person is—Denver is not only exposing the constructed objectivity of the Africanist persona, she is also representing the critical enquiry a recognition of this shadowed presence might effect. Growing up enslaved within the “haunted” house of 124, Denver comes to be determined by its Africanist “ghost” and the narrative its presence has denied her. When, at one point in her childhood, the ghost begins to “irritate her, wear her out with its mischief” (103), Denver leaves the house and follows the other children of the neighborhood to Lady Jones “house-school” where “Lady Jones did what whitepeople thought unnecessary if not illegal” (32)—taught black children to read and write. As Denver begins to be “thrilled” by the power of literacy—“the capital *w*, the little *i*, the beauty of the letters in her name, the deeply mournful sentences from the Bible Lady Jones used as a

textbook”—she represents the post-Civil War African American writer trying to make a name for him/herself and construct a sense of self-hood—a “little *i*”—through authorship. Yet Denver’s days at Lady Jones’ school are ended for ever when Nelson Lord asks the question that “blocked up her ears” (252), and reveals a knowledge that “had been lying [in Denver] all along”—the futility of attempting to construct a “little *i*” through a body of literature presided over by the “capital *w*” of “whiteness.”

Returning to the house, Denver finds “release in the concentration [she] began to fix on the ghost,” which began to hold “all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (103). This projection onto the Africanist presence or “literary blackness” of emotion too disturbing to be dealt with, and the introjection of “literary whiteness” that results, reflect what Morrison notes as “a clear flight from blackness in a great deal of Afro-American literature” (Moyers 262). When Paul D arrives at the house, however, and Denver begins discussing her feelings of alienation and loneliness and their origination in the presence of the ghost, she begins to cry and her tears are finally “for herself” (*Beloved* 123). Recognizing the way the “ghost in the machine” has come to determine her, she begins again to denounce it and assert her subjectivity. Yet with the removal of the “ghost” from the house and the arrival of the corporeal “Beloved” that consumes all of Denver’s “concentration,” this assertion of subjectivity is undermined.

As Denver, who does not have a past narrative of her own, begins to supply Beloved with the narrative of Sethe’s life, she begins “seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved” (78). The recognition of this “ghost in the machine” as an actual presence, and the reconstruction of the African American narrative through it, sheds new light on the narrative, reveals the voice and the subjectivity that have been denied it, reveals the way it has succumbed to the polarity of “literary whiteness/literary blackness.” Denver, who, like the contemporary reader, has grown up determined by this presence, becomes frightened at this realization and attempts to hold on to the presence that she has internalized and come to identify with, because the alternative would force her to admit that everything that has come to define her has been a fiction.

When Denver believes Beloved has left her in the cold shed, she again begins crying, but this time she is not crying for herself, but “because she has no self,” and the precariousness of this recognition is exemplified when she thinks, “a-dream-come-true comes true just to leave her on a pile of newspaper in the dark” (123). The recognition of what has allowed “literary whiteness” to function, to construct its set of rigid first principles that form a “sense of Americanness” would be a “dream-come-true” for the ‘othered’ groups that fall under its shadow, and with the identification of the “Africanist presence,” this dream “comes true.” Yet with this recognition comes responsibility, a responsibility for the undertaking of a study of remarkable proportions, with little or no precedent for guidance. Like the contemporary reader or critic with the canon laid out below him/her, “in the dark” or unprepared to assume the responsibility for the “darkness” that pervades it, Denver lies on her own pile of “literature,” and “decides to stay in the cold house and let the dark swallow her.”

Yet when Denver begins to notice what this Africanist presence in the house is capable of doing, how it grows “bigger,” “fed” on the narrative it has taken and subverted from Sethe, it “rocks her like gunshot” (241), and she decides to leave the sanctuary of the house and seek help. As she looks out from the steps and tries to find the courage to step off, she represents the predicament faced by any critic, possibly Morrison herself, who attempts to address and make known the subversive nature of the “Africanist presence” in the canon to the body of literary discourse, “where words could be spoken that would close your ears shut. Where, if you were alone, feeling could overtake you and stick to you like shadow.”

Pieces

As Beloved begins to be a permanent fixture in the house, Sethe reflects on her arrival:

Right after she saw the shadows holding hands at the side of the road hadn't the picture altered? And the minute she saw the dress and shoes sitting in the front yard, she broke water. Didn't even have to see the face burning in the sunlight. She had been dreaming it for years. (*Beloved* 132)

At the exact moment that Sethe makes the connection between the arrival of Beloved, the shadows, and all the unconscious symbolism surrounding this Africanist presence, Beloved

pulls a back tooth out of her mouth and thinks, "This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once [...] and [...] she would fly apart" (133).

In "Playing in the Dark," Morrison writes, "[i]t has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling [Africanist] population" ("Playing" 924). If *Beloved* is the "unsettled and unsettling" Africanist presence which serves to unite American literature into a "coherent entity," then her breaking into pieces may signal the shattering of the coherency of American literature that might arise with a recognition of this constructed and shadowed presence, the "settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them" (*Beloved* 175) by the "white writerly conscious." As *Beloved* looks at the "piece" that has broken off from her, she fears that one of her "two dreams: exploding and being swallowed" were coming true. Yet which of these "dreams" she believes is happening is unclear.

The recognition of the Africanist presence in American literature could effect one of two things. By "exploding" this presence, by identifying it in all of its various manifestations, in each of the separate works it determines, and by forming a school of thought for deconstructing and discrediting the structure which has erected it, American literary discourse could finally come to terms with the ghostly presence that haunts its canon. Conversely, it could choose to ignore this presence, to "swallow" it, and allow it to remain suppressed, unconscious, an integral yet hidden and unexamined component of American literature, but one that allows it to remain a "coherent entity." Or, perhaps, it might find a way to both "explode" and "swallow" it.

In the final chapter of the novel, after *Beloved* has disappeared from 124, the narrator writes:

Disremembered and unaccounted for, [*Beloved*] 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? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. 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. (*Beloved* 274)

Beloved, as the Africanist presence, has “waited” to “be loved,” to be “claimed” and to be “freed” from her silenced confines in the canon. To “claim” the right to “cry shame” on those who had put her there, and on those who had kept her there. Yet because critical discourse has not yet initiated a serious investigation into “American Africanism,” this presence remains invisible, “unaccounted for.” Without the endorsement of the arbitrators of critical discourse or of a proper school of thought to guide them, anyone who might go looking for this presence is “lost,” with no “name” to call. Without a cohesive enquiry and discipline on this subject, any individual attempts at “exploding” this presence would be “swallowed away” by the “chewing laughter” of literary discourse.

A Story to Pass On

In its original draft, *Beloved* ended with the next-to-last chapter (Caldwell 241). This ending, Paul D telling Sethe that she was her own “best thing,” and Sethe answering, “Me? Me?” (*Beloved* 273), exhibits a hope for the future and a budding self-hood for Sethe. Denver has moved out into the world and begun her own ‘narrative,’ Paul D has come back to Sethe, Beloved has disappeared, and “[u]nloaded, 124 is just another weathered house needing repair” (264). Yet Morrison chose to add a final chapter commenting on Beloved’s disappearance—a rich, obscure, melancholy narrative that subverts the novel’s previously planned happy ending. The question becomes, why?

If Morrison is, in fact, framing the deconstruction of “literary blackness” in the American literary canon with *Beloved*, then to offer a happy ending to the novel would indicate that the framework itself were enough—that the mere recognition of the problem of “American Africanism” is sufficient to solve it. That by providing the “views that may spring the whole literature of an entire nation from the solitude in which it has been locked” (“Unspeakable” 1), she has allowed the reader to already do so. Yet by adding this final narrative, she proves that “unloading” the canon, and “springing” it from its solitude will not be as simple as just that.

The chapter begins, “There is a loneliness that can be rocked. [...] Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing ...” (*Beloved* 274). If, by this “loneliness,” Morrison can be referring to the “solitude” of the American literary canon, then the construction of “American Africanism” in American literature might prove to have even farther-reaching implications than a mere investigation of the canon can resolve. If the denial of the “Africanist presence” in the canon has “locked” the “whole literature of an entire nation” into “solitude,” then it might be important to consider what it is that is keeping these locks from being opened.

Those that knew *Beloved* soon begin to forget her—“[r]emembering seemed unwise”—and “[w]here the memory of the smile under her chin might have been and was not, a latch latched and lichen attached its apple-green bloom to the metal” (274-5). Replacing the memory—or the recognition—of the “Africanist presence” in literature, is a “latch,” a lock that closes off the canon to scrutiny, that traps American literature in a false sense of unity as a “coherent entity,” and confines both “literary blackness” and “literary whiteness” into the “loneliness” of “solitude.” And while an investigation into “American Africanism” in the canon might have hoped to “spring” this lock, its task becomes infinitely more difficult by the manifestations of “nature” that have attached themselves to it.

In *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton writes, “[i]t is one of the functions of ideology to ‘naturalize’ social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself. Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the ‘natural’ sign is one of its weapons” (Eagleton 117). “The necessity for whiteness as privileged “natural” state, the invention of it,” might very well have been, as Morrison notes, “formed in fright” (“*Unspeakable*” 18), yet the fact remains that it was nevertheless formed, and exists to this day in the culture and in the literature of the United States—constructed, naturalized, protected and ignored. Attempting to overcome this ‘naturalization’ of “social reality” seems a futile venture, and Morrison ends *Beloved* so:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.
(*Beloved* 275)

And then the final word, “Beloved,” a repetition of the signification of the “ghost” by the white oppressor, the “‘natural’ sign” used for her objectification.

Yet just as the manifestations of the “Africanist presence” can only be read by reading “between the lines” of the conscious narrative, so too can Morrison’s ultimate objective with this last chapter only be read “between the lines.” As the narrator of the chapter recounts the details of Beloved’s disappearance, (s)he repeats the refrain, “It was not a story to pass on,” once after Beloved “erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away” and once after the words, “[w]hat made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on?” But then the refrain is altered, just a bit, to read, “This is not a story to pass on.” What the first repetition could be seen to indicate is a intimation not to let the denial of this “Africanist presence” be lost to critical discourse. With the second, a challenge to end the ‘naturalizing’ of “literary blackness.” And in the final repetition, a clue that “this” story, the novel, *Beloved*, itself serves as an outline for deconstructing the “Africanist” ‘othering’ practices of the American literary canon. For in reading between the lines of this line, even the words “pass on” can take on “deeper and other significances,” and what Morrison might be suggesting to critical discourse is that this framework for deconstruction is “not a story to (let die)” nor “a story to pass (up) on.”

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