Beloved

Woman, Thy Name Is Demon

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IF WE THINK OF Toni Morrison's work on a continuum from *Sula* (1974), where she begins the transformation of woman from human being to something other than human and where she experiments with sentience beyond death, through *Tar Baby* (1981), with its talking trees and butterflies, then *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), with its emphasis on the temporal transcendence of the grave, is a natural extension of those ideas. The ancient tree mothers who would claim Jadine as their sister by drowning her in tar if necessary are not so far removed from the single-mindedness of Beloved, who would kill Sethe as quickly as she would claim her as mother. In exploring the novel's basis in folk traditions, some prevailing ideas about the female body, especially those grounded in myth and fear, are especially illuminating.

Stereotypical conceptions of the female body as "Other" have pervaded oral and written literature. In contemporary times, athletes are warned against intimacy with women before important competitions, some husbands believe their wives poison food if they are allowed to cook while menstruating, and yet others believe their penises could literally be engulfed by women's vaginas. We could document a host of additional persistent and often destructive images of women; underlying these notions is a basic clash between the masculine (those who have power and voice) and

the feminine (those who are acquiescent and silent but potentially destructive), which is also worked out in Morrison's novel. These folk and popular stereotypes about the female body have often been bolstered by "scientific" research.

For example, in 1968 psychiatrist Wolfgang Lederer published a volume called *The Fear of Women.*[1] It is a storehouse of information on the control of female images throughout the ages, on how the female body was used to account for a plethora of problems in the world. As early as medieval times, woman stood as Frau Welt ("Mrs. World"), a deceptively beautiful damsel from the frontal view, who, upon being viewed from the rear, showed a disgusting, maggot-filled eruption crawling with snakes, frogs, and other vile creatures with whom she shared inclinations to make man's righteous path in the world difficult if not impossible. The ability to engulf and destroy, as well as to poison the air, were commonplace notions about women. Lederer documents those practices in certain cultures where menstruating women were encouraged to walk over newly plowed and planted fields in order to poison the insects and ensure the growth of the crops.

The blood that flowed every month concentrated the distinguishing differences between men and women that Lederer documents so carefully. And not only was woman the bleeder, but she was also insatiable in her desire for blood. Kali, the Indian goddess, is the epitome of the bloodthirsty female on the rampage against human, especially *man*-kind. Tales about her illustrate the recurring ambivalence of the traditions. On the one hand, woman is the mother/nurturer; on the other, she is the goddess/destroyer.

As recently as 1986, a song played repeatedly on black radio stations was the Isley Brothers' "Insatiable Woman." Its upbeat tempo, coupled with the soothing voice of the male singing the lyrics, quickly lulled one into forgetfulness against its evil intent. The female body, the singer complained, could never be satisfied; no matter what he gave—probably sperm donations—she wanted more. Obviously he could not keep delivering the donations at the rate at which she could receive them, so he could only verbally affirm: "Baby, I'm yours," and perhaps hope that she would let him be. The song and the verbal tradition it perpetuates of the engulfing, never-satisfied woman recalls the tale of the preacher and the pretty young woman. Preacher tales, a special subcategory of African-American folk narrative, frequently debunk the authority and prestige of ministers. Preachers are invariably painted as greedy; they especially love fried chicken, alcohol, and money. They are also impious and sexually unrestrained. As the story goes, a preacher who thought he would take advantage of her parents' absence and seduce a young woman gets the tables slightly turned on him. He sends her upstairs to the bedroom and maintains that he will be up shortly to "scare" her, his euphemism for sexual intercourse. He discovers, however, that her receptivity is longer than his stamina. After three trips upstairs and increasingly weaker, near-crawling returns, when she requests that he come upstairs and "scare" her yet another time, he responds: "Well, BOO, goddamn it!"[2]

The female body, as it has been written in the oral tradition and in sexist literature, is in part a source of fear, both an attraction and a repulsion, something that can please, but something that can destroy. The tricksters of tradition find one of their chores the task of bravely entering the vagina to break those teeth that tradition has long identified with it. Such actions are considered heroic—and at times helpful even to the woman herself, for the poor dear never realizes what difficulty she is in until some man tells her and proceeds to rescue her. And in *his* ending to the tale, she usually appreciates the rescue and indeed becomes more decorous in her sexual habits. Witchlike, Other, Strange, Fearful—that is how the female body has been characterized. In many instances the attributes center upon the demonic, as indeed many of those traditions I have described would encompass. Women could be witches or healers—depending upon point of view—only because they were in some way in league with the devil. Or indeed, just the nature of being female was considered evil, without the specific connotations of satanic contact.

The nature of evil—the demonic, the satanic—those are the features of the female body as written by Toni Morrison in *Beloved.* We can describe the title character as a witch, a ghost, a devil, or a succubus; in her manipulation of those around her, she exerts a power not of this world. In her absence of the tempering emotions that we usually identify with humankind, such as mercy, she is inhumanly vengeful in setting out to repay the one upon whom she places the blame for her too-early demise. We should note that this is not the first time that Morrison has called woman Demon.

In *Sula,* she begins the transformation of woman from human being to something other than human. The people in the Bottom make Sula into a witch whom they believe to be in league with the forces of evil if not with the devil himself. They believe that she makes Teapot fall off her steps, that she causes Mr. Finley's death when he chokes on a chicken bone, and that she is a witch who can make herself appear much younger than she is. Her suprahuman qualities lead them to ostracize her to the point of circumventing the rituals that usually apply to death and funerals in black com-

munities. Sula's demise, however, points to another source for comparison with Beloved. Sula's sentience beyond death, presented briefly in the book, is enough to signal that Morrison has drawn no final lines between the planes of life and death. Indeed, Morrison has asserted that the call of one of the stories that inspired *Beloved* worked on her so strongly that it may have surfaced unwittingly in her earlier novels: "I had been rescuing [the dead girl] from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life."[3]

Following the African belief that the demise of the body is not the end of being, which David Bradley develops so vividly in *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Morrison hints with Sula what becomes her major preoccupation in *Beloved.* During her life, Sula has given some insight into the actions of those who are set apart or deemed demonic. They owe allegiance only to themselves; Sula is interested only in making herself, Beloved is interested only in claiming and punishing her mother. Their desires are foremost; the wishes of others are inconsiderable. Sula sleeps with her best friend's husband without compunction; Beloved sleeps with her mother's lover. Though one is alive and the other returned from the dead, at several points the actions of the two characters are strikingly similar in motivation and execution.

The world view in *Sula* prepares us for the seeming topsy-turviness of *Tar Baby,* with its racing blind horsemen and mythic life forms, for the otherworldliness represented by Pilate's lack of a navel in *Song of Solomon,* and for the emphasis on the temporal transcendence of the grave in *Beloved.* Remember, too, that Eva talks to Plum after his death (he comes back to tell her things) and that Valerian sees Michael's ghost in the dining room on the night that Son intrudes into the island world. Morrison has well prepared her readers, therefore, for complete suspension of disbelief in the human and natural worlds. The female body reduced to desire makes Sula kindred in spirit and objective to Beloved. Consider, too, that Ajax, Sula's lover, leaves her when he begins to fear her body as woman, when he judges that she wants to trap him into marriage, or at least domesticity.

Woman's body is a threat to men in *Beloved* as well; that is the vantage point from which we see what happens in the novel. Paul D's arrival at Sethe's house brings with it the ancient fear of women. When he enters the house haunted by Beloved's ghost, it becomes the enveloping enclosure of the vagina; the vagina dentata myth operates as Paul D *feels* the physical threat of the house. The red light of the baby's spirit drains him, makes him feel overwhelming grief, feminizes him. Sethe and Denver live in the

presence of the spirit; they may be annoyed by the spirit of the "crawling-already?" baby, but they have little to fear from it as females. Indeed, there is evidence that Beloved may be nurturing them into acceptance of her later physical, human manifestation. They comment at one point that "the baby got plans" (37).

For Paul D, however, the house is immediately his enemy, a veritable threat. He perceives that it bodes no good for him, and he senses—more than he knows—that the contest is between male and female spirits. Walking through the "pulsing red light," "a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry. It seemed a long way to the normal light surrounding the table, but he made it—dry-eyed and lucky" (9). To cry is to be broken, diminished as a man. Holding himself together against such a feminine breakdown, Paul D already views the house as a threat to his masculinity. He therefore enters it like the teeth-destroying tricksters of tradition entered the vagina, in the heroic vein of conquering masculine will over female desire. The competition, as it develops, then, seems initially unfair—a grown man against a baby. The supernatural element of the baby's spirit neutralizes the inequality somewhat, but the spirit of maleness in this initial battle seems stronger even than Beloved's supernaturalism. In his confrontation with the house, Paul D *wills* Beloved's spirit away. His vocal masculine will is stronger than her silent, though sometimes noisy, desire. The power of his voice to command behavior, even that of spirits, is ultimately stronger than the spirit's desire to resist.

Or at least that is one possible reading of the confrontation. Another would be to explore it from the perspective of Beloved's demonic nature. In this seeming rite of exorcism, it is not Beloved who is removed but Paul D who is lulled into a false sense of victory. The demonic Beloved voluntarily leaves the scene in order to prepare for a greater onslaught of female energy. In seemingly forcing Beloved to leave, Paul D, like the heroes of tradition, gives to Sethe and Denver the peace that they have been unable or unwilling to give to themselves. Presumably he has made the society better. The house is quiet, he and Sethe can pretend to be lovers, and the women can contemplate such leisure activities as going to a circus.

By blending the temporal and the eternal planes of existence, however, Morrison gives Beloved the upper hand for most of the novel. As the shapeshifter who takes on flesh-and-blood human characteristics, Beloved introduces a logic and a world view into the novel that defy usual responses to such phenomena. Certainly in the black folk tradition, a ghost might occasionally appear among the living—to indicate that all is well, to teach a lesson, or to guide the living to some good fortune, including

buried treasure. There are few tales, however, of revenants that actually take up residence with living relatives. One such tale, "Daid Aaron," which is from the Gullah people, centers upon the theme of revenge. Aaron refuses to go to the dwelling of the dead because his wife is already showing signs of her intention to have other suitors. But then, that is a male/female conflict as well. The widow finally gets rid of Aaron when he requests that her fiddler suitor provide dance music. Aaron dances gleefully and madly, faster and faster, until he comes apart, literally bone by bone.[4] Whether she knew of such tales or not, Morrison has asserted that she and her family members "were intimate with the supernatural" and that her parents "told thrillingly terrifying ghost stories."[5]

Beloved has a brief experience that brings to mind the possibility of disintegration comparable to Aaron's. She pulls a tooth, then speculates:

> Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting. (133)

But Beloved does not decay. Like a vampire feeding vicariously, she becomes plump in direct proportion to Sethe's increasing gauntness. Vengeance is not the Lord's; it is Beloved's. Her very body becomes a manifestation of her desire for vengeance and of Sethe's guilt. She repays Sethe for her death, but the punishment is not quick or neat. They attempt to choke Sethe to death in Baby Suggs's clearing and the lingering pain of that encounter is but the beginning of Beloved's taking over the women's lives. Before she can accomplish that, however, she must extricate the most formidable opposition, Paul D. In another demonic parallel in the male/female clash, she becomes the traditional succubus, the female spirit who drains the male's life force even as she drains him of his sperm. Beloved makes herself irresistible to Paul D, gradually forcing him, through each sexual encounter, to retreat farther and farther from the territory she has claimed as her own. Her "shining" or sexual latching on to him causes him initially to sleep in a rocking chair in the kitchen, then in Baby Suggs's keeping room behind the kitchen, then in the storeroom, and finally in the "cold house" outside the main house. *"She moved him,"* and Paul D "didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he

was moving himself" (114, emphasis added). Their three weeks of sexual encounters in the cold house result in a guilty Paul D trying to confront Sethe with the news only to find that he cannot; Beloved's control over him, together with his discovery of Sethe's killing of her baby, force him off the premises altogether. After all, what option does he have? To stay is to contemplate the violations he has committed—sleeping with a woman who has been much abused and abusing her further by sleeping with her daughter/ghost. To go or to stay is to contemplate a possible further evil—having slept with the devil—either in the form of the mother or the daughter.

Paul D's departure makes clear that Beloved has used her body to drain him not only physically but spiritually as well. He becomes a tramp of sorts, sleeping where he can, drinking excessively, literally a shadow of his former self. From the man who was strong enough to exorcise a spirit, Paul D reverts to his wandering, unsure of his residence from day to day and unclear about what kind of future, if any, he has. The picture of him sitting on the church steps, liquor bottle in hand, stripped of the very maleness that enables him to caress and love the wounded Sethe, is one that shows Beloved's power. There is no need for her to kill Paul D; she simply drains him sufficiently to make him one of the living dead, in a limbolike state from which he cannot extricate himself as long as Beloved reigns at 124 Bluestone Road. For this male warrior, therefore, the demonic female has won over him in the very realm he has used to define himself; his sexual fear of woman is justified.

But the parasitic Beloved is not content to destroy maleness; she also attacks femaleness. Or, I should say it is perhaps less femaleness that she attacks in Sethe than motherhood, another symbol of authority almost masculine in its absoluteness. We could say, then, that as far as Beloved is concerned, Paul D and Sethe are in some ways shaped from the same mold—those who have the power to command, those who have power over life and death. In her resolve to escape from slavery, Sethe, like Jean Toomer's Carma, is "strong as any man."[6] In the resolve that keeps her going during the ordeal of Denver's birth she is again, stereotypically, strong as any man. In her determination to kill her children to keep them from being remanded to slavery, she is again as strong as any man. Beloved's anger with Sethe for having killed her may be centered in mother love, but it is also centered in the patriarchal authority that Sethe assumed unto herself in killing Beloved, in becoming the destructive, authoritative mother/goddess. Beloved's war against Sethe, then, can be read from one perspective as a further attack against masculine privilege,

against the power over life and death that is stereotypically identified with males or with those masculine mother/goddesses.

Think, too, about how Sethe is viewed in the community. Comparable to Sula, she is too proud, too self-sufficient, too independent, generally too much on her own for the neighbors. Her rugged individualism is more characteristic of males than females of the time. The more feminine thing would be for her to need help from the community. She neither seeks nor accepts any before Beloved arrives; later, she is too transformed to care.

Perhaps we are sufficiently encouraged, then, to see Sethe as a masculine presence that the female demon seeks to exorcise. Beloved symbolically begins feeding upon Sethe as the succubus feeds upon males; she takes food from her mouth, eats whatever there is to eat, and inspires Sethe to leave her job, thereby relinquishing her ability to feed herself, and causing her to shrink, to become diminished in stature as well as in self-possession. By denying to Sethe the power to support herself, Beloved initially attacks Sethe's spirit of independence. She sends her into a stupor comparable to that of Paul D. But Beloved is not content to stupefy Sethe; she is after her life force. She drains her by slowly starving her and, as the neighbors believe, beating her (255). The apparently pregnant Beloved blossoms, glows, and continues to get plump as the shrinking Sethe literally becomes a skeleton of her former self. Like Paul D, Sethe loses willpower, thereby losing the ability to control her own body or her own destiny. She and Paul D are assuredly slaves to Beloved's desire as Sethe and the Pauls were literally slaves earlier. Beloved becomes the arbiter of life and death, so playfully so that Sethe acquiesces in her own decline.

It is in part the playfulness of the situation that tones down its potentially destructive side. With Beloved, Sethe has the opportunity to live out two fantasies. First of all, she can be mother to the daughter she has never known. Giving all her time and attention to Beloved makes it easy for the demon to execute her desire. On the other hand, by giving all to Beloved, Sethe becomes childlike, pleading for acceptance by a harsh "parent" who is more intent upon cruel punishment than understanding forgiveness. By relinquishing her will to survive, Sethe again becomes Beloved's willing victim.

Their relationship raises questions about Morrison's intentions in the novel. Is guilt the central theme, thereby making it understandable how Sethe acquiesces in her own slow destruction? Does the guilt deserve the punishment of the demonic? Is infanticide so huge a crime that only otherworldly punishment is appropriate for it? If, on the other hand, we understand, accept, and perhaps even approve of the dynamic that allowed a

slave mother to kill rather than have her children remanded to slavery, would not the dominant theme be love? After all, Sethe has precedence in her action; her own mother killed some of her children rather than allow them to be slaves, or to recognize her own forced depravity in having given birth to them (62). If the theme is love, what warrants allowing Sethe to be so violated for her love of Beloved?

As the novel develops, it would seem that Beloved's *desires,* irrational as they are, are the acceptable force driving the story. I emphasize desire as opposed to will simply because Beloved is not to be denied in what she wants. Her desire is for a mother, and she will have that mother even if it means killing her in the process of claiming her. She desires Paul D and takes him in spite of her mother's involvement with him. As it manifests itself in the novel, desire is unbridled id, self-centered and not to be easily denied.[7] Will, on the other hand, can be altruistic; Paul D wills Beloved out of 124, it can be argued, in part to bring a measure of peace to Sethe and Denver. The destructive, irrational force is pure desire, which in turn is perhaps the most otherworldly. It is out of desire for something that spirits are able to make the journey between the two worlds. Beloved, the personification of desire, thus epitomizes the demonic.[8] Her lack of caring is spiteful retaliation for not being allowed to live; she is the unleashed force of the childish mentality at which her life ended. Twenty years in body but eighteen months in mind, she is the objective, physical distillation of desire.

Beloved's characterization ultimately makes her "Thing," unhuman, unfeeling, uncaring except in the perpetuation of what she wants. Like Frau Welt, she cannot live up to the promise of herself; to become involved with her is to be destroyed. As Thing, Beloved has no consistently seen reflective trait; the point of view of the narrative encourages us to see her as the traditional vampire. We see her inner thoughts for only brief moments, which do not evoke undue sympathy for her. We are left to judge her objectively, to infer motive from a distance, and thereby to solidify our evaluation of her as demonic. Her actions suggest that she has ultimate power of judgment, that vengeance is indeed hers, that her brand of justice has no guiding morality to temper it with mercy.[9]

In her amorality, Beloved shares kinship with some of the tricksters of tradition—ever guided by personal desires and frequently identified as masculine. Such figures are recognizable by the power they wield, without consideration for those being affected by that power. Brer Rabbit kills the elephant simply to escape detection for a crime he has committed, or he avenges himself on the entire alligator family because of an insult by Brer

Alligator. Unleashed and unrestrained, Brer Rabbit is limited only by the power of imagination that conceived the cycle of tales in which he stars. With her supernatural dimension, Beloved has no obvious limits. Nonetheless, she ultimately seems subject to a force greater than herself.

A potentially troublesome part of the novel is how Beloved is exorcised from 124. Paul D's initial driving of her spirit from the premises is merely temporary. She is finally exorcised not by individuals working in isolation but by a community of effort directed against her presence. And that community of effort comes from a group of women, women who call upon ancient and contemporary messages, murmuring incantations and singing songs, to control Beloved. Is Morrison suggesting finally that women, who may themselves be demonic—or *because* they are demonic—are the only force with sufficient power to control that evil? Is it a question of good versus evil? Are the women who send Beloved away in any way identified with the forces of good? Most of them are certainly not the image of stereotypically traditional churchgoing black women. Nor do they pursue the exorcism from altruistic motivations. Rather, like Richard Wright's District Attorney Ely Houston pursuing the murderous Cross Damon in *The Outsider* (1953), they are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the evil in their midst. They see in it tiny mirrors of the selves they have suppressed, and they want it extracted before it touches them too greatly or even has the potential to reclaim them. And they are offended. They "didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (257).

In other words, Beloved is a threat to them in the psychological sphere as effectively as Sula is a threat to the women in the Bottom in the sexual sphere. Extending the philosophy from that novel, where the community is content to recognize evil and let it run its course, the women in *Beloved* cannot afford that detachment. Letting Beloved run her course may mean the destruction of them all. They must exorcise that part of themselves, therefore, that is a threat to them. If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out. This is not a far-fetched philosophy when we consider that throughout history it is a frequently women who cast sanctions most vehemently upon other women.

Exorcising the demonic part of the self so that all women are not judged to be demons—that is what the women are about in getting Beloved to leave 124. And how do they accomplish this? With a combination of pagan and religious rituals. They initially find power in numbers as they gather in a group of thirty to move toward 124. They raise their voices in singing and in religious murmurs as they march along the road. The

comparative images that come to mind are straight out of *The Golden Bough*. The voices raised serve the same function as the sticks and pans villagers of pretechnological cultures might have used to drive evil spirits from their midsts. The act of singing itself serves as a chant, perhaps as the proverbial "witch doctor" of ancient times might have used to implore or command that some living/hearing evil take its leave from the environs of the innocent and the helpless.

What the pregnant Beloved sees then, as she comes to the front door of 124, is that those with whom she identifies as well as despises are organized against her. The mothers are multiplied many times over, as are the breasts of the women in Eloe, Florida, whom Jadine confronts in *Tar Baby;* against the demands of that immutable force of potential mother/goddesses, who seem to represent justice without mercy, Beloved can only retreat. The vengeance of parents punishing recalcitrant children is ultimately stronger than will or desire.

But Beloved's retreat may in reality be a departure from a battlefield where she has won, accomplished what she set out to do. Consider what happens as the white Mr. Bodwin drives up. In the near-reenactment of what happened at Beloved's death, it becomes clear that Sethe is nearly deranged. She is decidedly no longer the figure of authority and independence that she has been before Beloved's arrival. When she takes the ice pick in hand to save Beloved once again, the same set of imperatives does not apply. Slavery has ended; the man approaching is a rescuer rather than an enslaver; Sethe needs rescue *from* Beloved rather than rescuing her from someone else. Reduced to irrationality engendered by the wiping out of eighteen years of her life, Sethe is now the recalcitrant child, in need of correcting and nurturing (252). In this reading of the scene, Beloved can leave instead of being sent away because she has accomplished two things. First, she has caused Sethe to become temporarily deranged. Second, the result of that derangement is that Sethe acts without thought, instinctively, to save Beloved. What Beloved could not see as a "crawling-already?" baby, she is now able to see as an adult: that her mother's action, many years before and in its current duplicate, was indeed one of love. This reading does not mean that the demon changes her nature, but that she achieves her desire: tangible evidence that her mother loved her best of all. Ironically, to achieve that goal is simultaneously to risk eventual destruction of the individual of whom the evidence was required.[10]

Again, Beloved either leaves voluntarily or is driven out. Whatever interpretation we accept, one thing is clear: Sethe and Beloved cannot exist on the same plane. If Sethe is to live, Beloved must depart. If Beloved stays,

Sethe can only die. The trip from beyond, though, is apparently a one-time thing. Once removed from 124, the undelivered, restless Beloved roams the neighboring territory, her footprints a reminder that she is there but her desire fulfilled sufficiently so that she cannot return all the way to 124. Her inability to return is attested to in the return of Here Boy, the dog, to 124 and in the return of Paul D, the masculine presence. Of the animals traditionally believed to sense ghosts and evil spirits, dogs are perhaps first on the list.[11] When Here Boy takes up residence again, that is the folkloristic signal that Beloved will not be returning. When Paul D finds the energy to pursue Sethe again, to experience the returning of sexual desire as well as general concern for another human being, that is also a signal that Beloved will not be returning. Paul D's presence means health for Sethe, the opposite of what Beloved's presence meant. With the novel ending on a sign of health, there will at least be calm at 124.

And what of Beloved? The demon comes and goes. Humans interact with it, but it ultimately transcends them, returns to another realm of existence controlled only by human imagination. Morrison lifts Beloved from a void and returns her there. Her footprints relegate her to kinship with Big Foot and other legendary if not mythical creatures. Beloved goes from imagination to humanoid to legend, basically unchanged in her category as demon, the designation of Other that makes it impossible for her to be anything but eternally alone.

Shaping the Tales in the Tale

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison concocts a sequence of events in which she shares with her characters the creation of her novel. In the tradition of storytelling and composition, they are as much artists as she. In fact, it could be argued that there is a single master mind and that parts of that entity tell various parts of the tale. The story of Denver's birth provides the prime example of this multiple composition. Denver relates a part of the story (29–30, and especially 77–78). Sethe recounts another portion (31–32). And the omniscient narrator provides more (32–35, 78–85). Each teller carries the burden for her particular portion, which is frequently shaped by the audience before whom it is created. Consider the power of audience in the instance in which Denver feeds on Beloved's reaction to her story of the pregnant Sethe roaming through dog- and patteroller-infested woods. Inspired by her audience of one, Denver allows her creative imagination to leap far beyond the mere fact of her mother's experience:

> Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. (78)

Denver may know part of what Sethe relates, but she does not usurp Sethe's authorship by recounting in any great detail the part of the story that Sethe relates in detail. And Sethe takes up her portion of narration where Denver leaves off. They know, or seem to know instinctively, what is needed to complete the story; therefore, Morrison imbues them with a portion of her omniscience, a trait that makes them somewhat otherworldly and intuitive, or at least a trait that suggests the interconnectedness of the lives, minds, and hearts of the three women. The single controlling narration gives Morrison at some level the same relation to her story as her characters, while at another it is obvious that Morrison as author of the text ultimately controls the story. When she does share narration with her characters, Morrison shows an intuitive respect for their collective experience, one that binds them as strongly to each other as they are bound to her as their creator.

The story of Denver's birth is as much rumor and conjecture as it is fact, or so the townspeople believe. It is too fantastic to be taken at face value and thus borders on folktale. As she was trying to escape from slavery, so the story goes, Sethe, then six months pregnant, met the white girl Amy Denver, who not only laid healing hands upon her lashed back and swollen feet, but also attended at Denver's birth. These basic details get embellished depending upon who is relating the story to whom. In a time when patterollers were rampant and white people were believed to be instinctively hostile toward blacks, Sethe's story violates the rules of interracial interaction with which her fellow blacks are familiar. The more logical expectation would have been for Amy to turn Sethe in. This seeming discrepancy, combined with Sethe actually escaping in her condition, leads some of the locals to speculate that there is something unnatural about her even before she kills Beloved and pridefully shuns them all. The tale, then, already has components of legend, myth, and outright lying before it begins to get reshaped in the minds and memories of Sethe, Denver, and their neighbors. When the other events ensue, the townspeople reject Sethe not only because

of her pride, but perhaps because she is too witchlike or too otherworldly for them.

As they tell this and other stories to each other, therefore, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved form a small folk community in which they all have distinct roles to play. Sethe discovers as quickly as Denver does how much Beloved appreciates stories: "It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling" (58), so she tells Beloved about her "diamonds." Oral history joins hands with fiction and rumor in basing the stories in a germ of truth; that germ is quickly reduced—or elevated—to motif as, through repeated tellings, the stories are modified and reshaped to suit the imagination and needs of the teller and her audience. The women are inseparable in their bid to create the stories and in their need to perpetuate the lore about their existence. Their family folklore binds them to a bone-chilling, destructive interaction that may have historical parallels at its most basic level but soon transcends the traditional.

The *process* of storytelling as presented in the works of such folklorists as Zora Neale Hurston is a pleasant communal affair. In their roles as tradition bearers, narrators can weave a tale individually or with participation and encouragement from their communities. Even when the community does not actively contribute to the telling of the tale, it nevertheless contributes actively by listening to the tale, for there can be no storytellers without audiences. The community of three women that Morrison creates in *Beloved,* therefore, is a dynamic storytelling one in which the tellers and their tales have a direct impact upon the lives of those around them. Denver estimates her value in direct proportion to the way in which the stories Sethe relates focus on her birth. Other stories about Sweet Home send her into periods of depression and loneliness that drive her to her secret place in the boxwood trees. Beloved's well-being, if we can call it such, exists in direct proportion to the stories that Sethe relates, no matter the topic; the *act* of storytelling itself is what pacifies Beloved and emphasizes the childish part of her being.

For Beloved, Sethe's willingness to tell stories is a measure of Beloved's obsession for and desire to possess Sethe, an indication of her unbridled id at work. The ownership component of their relationship, which becomes so apparent later, is presaged in Beloved's attempt to control Sethe's creative imagination. From the control she exerts in this arena, it is easy for her to make the transition to control of Sethe's body. Storytelling in this context, therefore, is about power, one sometimes sinister in its manifestations. Sethe weaves a story, but Beloved weaves a web of tangled parental responsibility and morality from which Sethe is barely able to escape.

Sethe is willing to satisfy Denver's desire for information about herself, but she stops when the stories make the past live again much too vividly for her. Her whole life is about "beating back the past" (73). That past can be kept at bay if the stories are untold, the memories sheathed. The paradox of Sethe's position is that both of her daughters desire the stories but for compellingly different reasons. And they each have different powers to exert in urging her to tell the tales. Beloved relies upon Sethe's less blemished memories of Sweet Home and, later, upon the guilt Sethe feels for having killed her. Denver also appeals to Sethe's more pleasant memories of Sweet Home as well as to Sethe's sense of guilt for excluding Denver from a history in which she clearly had a vital role. Thus for Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, storytelling is an active rather than a passive art, for it has the power literally to heal or kill.

To give such power to stories is one of Morrison's extensions of the function of folklore. She elevates the narratives beyond the entertaining, psychological, and educational functions they usually serve. Beloved may be entertained by the stories, and she certainly learns a lot about her family history, but she is also drawing her very lifeblood from them; they are creating a memory for her, filling in the gaps in her life that she cannot remember. For Denver, the stories enable her to fill in a history from which she had been excluded by virtue of her youth and forbidden from entering later by virtue of Sethe's vow to continue "keeping the past at bay" (42) and "beating back the past" (73). The stories provide self-definition in the way that legends, anecdotes, and personal experience narratives define their subjects.

Denver's geographical location at the point of storytelling makes this idea clearer. She lives at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio, in a house whose porch provides the boundary for the "edge of the world." As a secluded, psychologically immature, and functionally illiterate person, she is as much heir to the horrors of falling off the edge of the world as those early explorers who believed that the world was flat. Left with an imagination uninformed by the reality beyond her porch, she can create whatever monsters she wishes. An early participant in her history but without the maturity to register it, Denver has to find means to place herself within her own life, within her own family; she must flesh out her life from one dimension to multiple dimensions, from isolation to involvement, from a house to the world. Storytelling is her continual birth process, her continual bid to find herself in the family portrait and to find value within the

family. Consider how she imaginatively concocts stories about an absent father who will one day rescue her from the difficult situation she sometimes believes she is in with Sethe; evocations of fairy tales, with the passive princess waiting to be rescued, immediately come to mind. Denver's fantasy, like those of many children, locates her squarely at the center of value in her family portrait.

Her contacts with people during Baby Suggs's lifetime were not sustained enough for her to develop a sense of what is normal. She may well have grown up thinking that spending time in jail with her mother was not unusual if Nelson Lord had not asked the question that brought on her deafness. Certainly her becoming deaf is an indication that she believes she is somehow stigmatized, but she is able to judge that only in relation to her rejection by the other children. She has not previously thought that her situation was somehow wrong, that her mother's act was an unlawful, immoral, isolating one.

Denver is a tablet upon which her own life can be written. The stories of her birth are the chalk for that creation. Stories, for Morrison, then, are much more vibrant and viable forces in the lives of her characters than they are in historic folk communities. They are not just effects; they are effects with consequences. The consequence of Denver learning about herself is that she can begin to form the basis upon which to grow into an adult human being. The consequence of Beloved learning about herself is much more destructive; it enables her to exert more control over the lives of those around her, and indeed the knowledge she gains through the information provided by storytelling could enable her to become a murderer. Morrison therefore strips the word down to its original, creative essence; it can be made flesh, or it can destroy.

It is no wonder, then, that Morrison describes Denver's telling of her birth story to Beloved as a creative act of godly proportion. Denver gives "blood," a life force, to the "scraps" of stories she has gotten from her mother and grandmother. Her infusion of blood thereby grants a "heartbeat" (78) to what she relates. We are immediately reminded of Ezekiel and the dry bones, with God asking, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3). Through imagination (faith), the power to create what did not exist before—or existed only in a half-formed state—Denver and the other women reiterate the power of words.

Morrison thus draws upon biblical implications of the word as well as upon those connotations of creation that pervade the African-American folk bible. From Genesis comes "And God *said*, 'Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), "And God *said*, 'Let us make man in our image'" (Genesis 1:26), but

from the pages of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* we get the specific folk impetus for what God said. The world is here *because* God *said*, "I'm lonely—I'll make me a world," and with each creation, he proclaims, "That's good." The anthropomorphic God who responds to the wishes of his people, as in the tale of the black Adam and Eve climbing up to heaven to ask God to reconcile the discrepancies in male and female power,[12] connects the human and extranatural realms in ways comparable to those Morrison devises. The invitation to appear at 124, combined with Paul D's voice, are the words that name the flesh that Beloved becomes, just as the supernatural Jesus is made flesh. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Just as the word can bring forces not of this world to life, *sound*, the pre-word condition we might say, can have equally effective consequences. It is sound that eventually drives Beloved out of 124 just as it has been the word that has made her flesh. Words, then, are an active force in the novel (and they have just as much shaping force as hands).

These single entities become even more potent when they are shaped into the larger units called stories. Consider the story—as told by whites and printed in the newspaper—of Sethe's killing of Beloved; it is almost as destructive to Paul D as stories other than those of her birth are to Denver—they diminish her. In the minds of the whites who arrest and try Sethe, and those who record her story, she is a horrible statistic, an indication of the inhuman acts of which blacks are presumably capable. Their power of the press, along with the horror it relates, diminishes her in the eyes of the black community as well as in Paul D's eyes. They use a narrative to shape a life.

The operative dynamic between Denver, Sethe, and Beloved is one in which they have the power to replenish or diminish each other by the sheer sound of their voices (remember Janie Crawford discussing the potency of lying thoughts in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). This power is comparable to that we see in some folktales in which there is a magical component to the spoken word. Consider, for example, the ability of various conjurers to command inanimate objects to come to life (to speak, dance, or perform some other action). I think especially of the tale in which crafty John the slave has a short stint as a fortune-teller by commanding a cowhide to come to life and do his bidding.[13]

The emphasis upon the power of words becomes another way for Morrison to break down the barrier between planes of existence in the novel, to show once again that powers assigned to one realm or the other may or may not adhere to their assignments. It also stresses the blurring of lines

between human and supernatural acts, which is a corollary to the breaking down of planes of existence. We might expect Beloved to act (and she does) in many ways like a demon—or a goddess—but Morrison makes it clear that Sethe's and Denver's intuitive powers, as well as the power of their voices, may also cross over the human/divine marker and become extranatural in what they can accomplish. This is also obviously the case with the women who drive Beloved out of 124; their voices combine in their power to fight the demon/devil, and who can wage such a battle successfully if not a divine/creative force? Not only do the women call upon God, but they also assume the power of godhead. Ella has made the decision about the limits of activities for spirits (that they may have legitimate reasons for returning but they do not have the right to punish the living), which is a divine decision, and she follows through on it in her control of the extranatural force (Beloved) that has made the decision necessary.

Thus Morrison adapts the dynamic of storytelling and the power of the word to create, alter, and destroy personalities. Hers is a world of friendly competition, polite verbal contests, turned dangerous. Getting the best of an opponent is apparent in storytelling sessions where teller and audience interact without restraint, but other considerations come into play with the novel.

As many scholars have recognized, the transition from oral to written necessarily distances the author/teller of a tale from the reader/listener. They maintain that the written form loses the immediacy that registers audience response to teller;[14] it also eliminates the corrective, participatory option for audiences. I would contend that Morrison succeeds in closing that gap by creating a story that insists upon response from readers. She does that by politely assaulting our acceptance of certain cultural assumptions. Initially, she challenges beliefs about morality, about the absoluteness of good and evil; she has done so in all of her books, but the challenge is more intense in *Beloved.* Killing a child is certainly antithetical to the basic roots of our society, but Morrison forces us to ask again and again what we might have done under the circumstances. And she succeeds in making Sethe so simply human and American (the God-given right to motherhood, love of one's children, desire of a better life for them, love for freedom, nonconformity) that we cannot easily condemn her act even when we clearly do not condone it. The moral issues, therefore, lock us into participation in the novel. We are constantly encouraged to ask questions: "Is Sethe right to kill Beloved? What would I have done under the same circumstances? Are some conditions of life worse than death?"

Morrison also draws us into active intellectual participation in the

novel by challenging our beliefs about ghosts. In western societies, where we are taught that the demise of the body is the end of being in this realm, it is difficult to conceive of a ghost taking up residence in someone's home for more than a year. Yet Morrison treats that as a probable occurrence and invites us to suspend disbelief long enough to see where she takes up with the possibility.

We are also drawn into the active suspense of the tale. We know very early on *what* happened, but we don't know *why* or *how.* We read on to learn the answers to those questions. I suspect that there is also a kind of voyeuristic enterprise at work; we read on to see if Morrison's imagination will overstep the bounds of good taste and provide us with some of the specifics of the atrocities of whites' inhumanity to blacks during slavery. The titillation in suspense is thus centered not only upon plot but also upon the very nature of what it means to be human, how slavery alters that status, and how characters—black and white—respond to that alteration.

Reading the novel is more than an intellectual experience; it is a physical one. This is especially true with many mothers of young children. They bring to bear their identification with Sethe, their hope that mother and child can somehow be saved even when they know that Morrison will not allow them that possibility. What they feel as mothers is wrapped up in their superficial bonding with Sethe as well as in their love for their own children. Reading the novel is also a physical experience for those who are naturally squeamish about violence and brutality and who suffer some physical discomfort as a result of reading about them.

The author/reader interaction for this text may be delayed, therefore, but it is only minimally less powerful than if Morrison were sitting in our living rooms telling us the story of Margaret Garner and the research she did to create Sethe's story. The emotions and reactions Morrison is able to evoke in us as she tells her tale place her in the best tradition of oral performers who weave magical and unusual worlds for us to contemplate, applaud, evaluate, condemn, or stare at in wonder. As Morrison herself has asserted, she wants her readers actively involved in her narratives. In order "faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture," she observes that group involvement is essential; "the text, if it is to take improvisation and audience participation into account, cannot be the authority—it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale."[15]

For Morrison, then, storytelling is the form as well as the substance of her creation of *Beloved.* By developing her novel associatively, that is, by

narratively duplicating the patterns of the mind, the way it gathers tidbits of experiences in *seemingly* random fashion, she achieves a structural effect that evokes the process of oral narration.[16] She thereby weds folklore to literature with a finesse uncharacteristic of most writers seeking such a blend. On close examination, it becomes clear that her novel is as much folklore as fiction, as much oral history as legend. In drawing upon folk forms, characters, styles, and ideas, Morrison provides an arena for scholars to work out some of the intricacies of the ties between folklore and literature.

When the Called Rescinds Her Calling

The power of words is manifested not only in storytelling events in *Beloved* but also in the specific textual verbal art of preaching—or, I should say, of calling people together for preachinglike sessions. As the convener of the sessions and the person anointed in such traditions, Baby Suggs is the closest the novel comes to a traditional Christian world view, and she does not allow it to come very close.

In African-American folk religion, preachers are "called" to their profession, that is, they get some sign from God that He needs their energies; accordingly, they become workers in His vineyard. While Baby Suggs is certainly in the tradition of being called, she points more to the folk imagination in her anointing than to biblical traditions. With the blessings of her community, she anoints herself out of her own experiences of suffering and shame, as well as out of appreciation for the fact that she can now call her body her own. She becomes "Baby Suggs, holy." Yet in another of Morrison's intertwinings of the secular and sacred traditions in African-American culture, Baby Suggs uses the *form* of religious rituals to impart secular advice.

Baby Suggs is a "woman of words," which puts her on par with the godly, creative power of words noted earlier. From the preaching tradition documented by James Weldon Johnson in *God's Trombones*, to the toast tradition depicting characters like Shine ("The Titanic"), to Muhammed Ali's diatribes against his opponents, to contemporary rap music, the man or woman of words has held a place of respect in African-American communities. Verbal artistry is an enviable, much-admired trait. The respect given Baby Suggs is attested to not only in the crowds that gather at the Clearing, but also in her house being a way station on the underground railroad and a general community center. The fact that her neighbors become

angry with her later does not erase the significance of the position she has historically held among them.

In her interactions with the crowds that gather in the Clearing (on *Saturday* afternoons, not Sunday mornings), Baby Suggs draws upon the call-and-response tradition informing almost all of African-American folklore. And the responses to her invocations are so intense that they give substance to what in many instances has degenerated into polite reactions. Unlike an audience whooping politely in response to a blues singer, the blacks in the Clearing expend heartfelt emotions at Baby Sugg's direction. They cry, dance, and laugh in celebration of the humanity they have bestowed upon themselves (87–89). In telling them that "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" (88), Baby Suggs solidifies the notion that their fate is in their own hands. Like their slave ancestors who took to their feet and the woods, they must carve out for themselves a space and a place to be. In the traditional inspirational guise of the master wordsmith, Baby Suggs blends the best of the sacred and the secular worlds. Two comments from Morrison seem especially relevant here: "It's always seemed to me that black people's grace has been with what they do with language."[17] Once asked what she considered distinctive or good about her fiction, Morrison replied: "The language. . . . It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself."[18] With a few words, selectively chosen, Baby Suggs is able to offer a transcendent experience for those who believe in her voice.

Baby Suggs becomes a communal poet/artist, the gatherer of pieces of her neighbors' experiences and the shaper of those experiences into a communal statement. Her role is in many ways like that of a ritual priestess.[19] At appointed times, she summons the group, motivates it to action, and presides over its rites of exorcism; the pain and grief of slavery are temporarily removed in a communal catharsis. Having given up seven of her eight children to slavery, Baby Suggs knows what it means to have to put the heart back together after it has been torn apart valve by valve. As a medium who gives voice to unvoiced sentiments, Baby Suggs, like Claudia MacTeer, articulates what many of her people cannot. She is therefore participant and observer, the subject and the object of creativity. Transplanted to the soil of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the northward progression typical of blacks, Baby Suggs is the archetype for leadership among those sometimes drifting masses.

Her role in the community, therefore, makes her larger than life. She becomes hope-bringer and visionary, suggesting to her neighbors that the possibilities on the northern side of the Ohio River may indeed be realized. As a holy woman, a sane and articulate Shadrack, an unselfish Eva, Baby Suggs uses her heart to become the heart of the community. People expect her to be superior to them, yet they find it hard to forgive the "excess" of the feast she gives upon Sethe's arrival on Bluestone Road. They want their goddess to keep her feet of clay visible, so they wrongly interpret the feast event. It is a ritual of possibility, a rite of incorporation for Sethe, not a slap at their poverty.[20] It is a larger version of the Saturday afternoons, of what freedom can mean. Unfortunately, Baby Suggs's neighbors can acquiesce in the routine transcendent rites, but not in the elaborate one.

By denouncing her calling, Baby Suggs rejects the power of folk imagination, which has clearly served a constructive purpose for her and the entire community along Bluestone Road. Giving up means she denies the possibility for transcendence that is inherent in folk religion as well as in the blues. She therefore finally short-circuits tradition by lifting herself away from the bonds of caring; whereas Pecola was forced out, Baby Suggs leaves voluntarily, a choice that seems to undercut her role as an ancestor figure.[21] To give up voice for silence returns Baby Suggs to the passive, acquiescent role that defined her character during slavery and indeed makes her a slave to life rather than a master of it. Instead of remaining one of the shapers of the tales in the novel, of the destinies of its people, she chooses instead to become an object for contemplation by her neighbors and the readers. By abdicating her creative role, Baby Suggs descends from the legendary status that has defined her to become just another victim of slavery, a victimization all the more tragic because she clearly had the power not to adhere to such a fate.

The Myth of Sweet Home

In Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Party" and in the popular folktale "Master's Gone to Philly Me York," the image of slavery is unlike that in most revisionist history books. Dunbar depicts black people as having a delightful ball to which four plantations of slaves have been invited. They have plenteous quantities of mouth-watering food, leisure time for games and dances, and the unmatched good humor to appreciate the wonderful lives they lead. "Master's Gone to Philly Me York" is a tale of classic slave wish fulfillment. The master goes away for a few days and leaves a faithful slave

in charge with the expectation that the plantation business will be run as usual. Seizing his opportunity, the slave slaughters a number of the master's livestock, invites slaves from surrounding plantations for a barbecue, and assumes the throne of power the master previously held.[22]

The worlds depicted contrast strikingly to the beatings, separation of families, inadequate diet, and other atrocities that characterized slavery, yet in concept they bear striking similarity to the world created on the Garner plantation in *Beloved;* there are no beatings, food is plentiful, and freedom of judgment and action are not only allowed but encouraged. Sweet Home—before the arrival of schoolteacher—is every slave's dream of how that intolerable condition can be made tolerable. Women are not raped; men are not beaten like mules; and Garner is willing to allow slaves to hire their time and purchase their families and themselves.

From a relative perspective, the place is as sweet as its name. In remembering what it was before schoolteacher arrived, Sethe and other of its inhabitants imbue it with an aura of myth, of folktale larger than life, and the persons who inhabit it in turn become larger than life.[23] Schoolteacher's appearance is significant in contributing to this image, for as he destroys what once was, that former state is highlighted even more in the memories of those who knew it earlier. The mythical Sweet Home, then, assumes such proportions in direct relation to the memories of atrocities that spoiled its paradisiacal state. And these memories in turn shape the narrative structure of the novel. Defying linearity, memory and imagination combine to give an oral quality to the telling of the tale, just as they give a folkloristic bent to the perception of characters and the territory on which they reside.

Garner has been very much god in that paradise of Sweet Home. Like Eva Peace, he appropriates to himself the power of naming as the tangible symbol of his godhead; he goes further than Eva, however, for where she was content to name individuals, he names a species. He can call slaves men in the world that he has created, in his plantation paradise, just as Valerian Street can invite Son to dinner in the world in *Tar Baby* where he plays with shaping everyone's life. Before the satanic schoolteacher arrives, Garner has clearly given unprecedented license to the slaves and has won the enmity of his neighbors. In designating his slaves men, he has violated the boundaries of master/slave interaction (most of his fellow slaveholders consider their charges less than human), and he has set himself apart in a world where the maintenance of the system depends upon conformity from slaves as well as from masters.

Garner's unorthodox position, though, elevates him to legendary sta-

tus with his neighbors as well as with his slaves. His forced physical contests with other white men are a constant reminder to them that he is different and a constant challenge to himself to live up to the physical prowess implied in that difference. As the following exchange illustrates, Garner seeks challenges from his neighbors:

> "Y'all got boys," [Garner] told them. "Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bough em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one."
>
> "Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men."
>
> "Not if you scared, they ain't." Garner's smile was wide. "But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too."
>
> "I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife."
>
> It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. "Neither would I," he said. "Neither would I," and there was always a pause before the neighbor, or stranger, or peddler, or brother-in-law or whoever it was got the meaning. Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men. (10–11)

By implying that slaves designated as men are capable of violating the sexual taboo between the races, perhaps with the consent or invitation of the white woman, Garner marginalizes himself from white society, then reclaims his place in it by showing what a *man* he is—rugged, individualistic, capable of insult, and capable of defending himself physically against the implications of his insult.

The man who makes a name for himself among his neighbors, therefore, is as much legendary to them for his physical prowess as for what they avow as his stupidity in not treating his slaves as they treat theirs. A man capable of broad gestures, such as escorting Baby Suggs across the river to Ohio when Halle's purchase of her is complete, Garner is a dangerous enigma to his neighbors. In the tradition of legendary perpetuation, they elevate and/or kill that which they do not understand.[24]

Garner is not the only larger-than-life personality at Sweet Home. The slaves and their interactions with Garner as well as with each other are equally legendary. Sethe, for example, is able to experience a period of sexual abstinence and courtship undocumented in the annals of slave history. In leaving the young virgin to herself, the Sweet Home men exhibit almost superhuman control. Other than Sixo, they have no human sexual outlet. For them to allow Sethe the year it takes for her to choose one of

them is perhaps reflective of a larger definition of manhood than that Garner has assigned to them. They elect to be human in a world that usually gives them permission to act like dogs.

The respect Paul A, Paul F, Paul D, Sixo, and Halle show to Sethe and what that means within self-imposed definitions of manhood is comparable to how Sethe later responds to being a mother. In spite of that larger world around her that has attempted to usurp her status as mother, she vows to remain one. In her actions, and in those of the men toward her, slaves show that masters cannot ultimately control the values of interaction among and between them.

These dual definitions of manhood (Garner's and the black men's themselves) enhance their legendary status, as do their individual actions. Sixo, for example, borders on folk characterization in several ways. His name sets him apart just as the repetition of names singles out the Pauls. But Sixo has an aura of mystery surrounding him comparable to many heroes of legend. He has mysterious origins; indeed, others refer to him as "the wild man" (11). He engages in solitary rituals that partly explain his unusual behavior: "Sixo went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open, he said. Privately, alone, he did it. None of the rest of them had seen him at it, but they could imagine it, and the picture they pictured made them eager to laugh at him—in daylight, that is, when it was safe" (25). His "flame-red tongue" and "indigo" (21) face mark him in the way that conjurers of tradition have had some distinguishing feature. He exhibits a kinship to the natural world and respects the spirits of the dead, especially those of Native Americans, whose permission he requests for use of a deserted lodge for a rendezvous (24). He chooses silence over language and gifts of interaction (baking sweet potatoes for the Pauls and Halle) over physical expressions. He executes single-minded devotion to nearly superhuman feats, such as walking thirty miles in between his field obligations to see Patsy, who becomes known as the Thirty-Mile Woman.

Sixo's solitude, occasional preference for nature over human beings, unusual behavior, and aura of derring-do bring to mind such folk figures as Big Sixteen and Stagolee. His spirit cannot be conquered even if his body is destroyed. He is the ultimate man, as illustrated in his laughing during the burning death perpetrated against him by schoolteacher and his nephews. Schoolteacher may whip him, may burn him, may kill him, but Sixo still triumphs. He triumphs physically in laughing rather than howling in pain when he is lynched, and he triumphs spiritually in knowing that Patsy is pregnant with his child. His yell of "Seven-O" (226) as he is

dying makes clear that this breed of man, Garner or no Garner, cannot be contained by a system called slavery.

And his howling laughter—as if he is on his way to better things than the demise of his body—links him to the themes that Morrison develops with Beloved. This plane of reality may be intolerable, and others may be equally intolerable, but perhaps there is one (where the blind horsemen of Isle des Chevaliers reside?) where Sixo can fully exploit those parts of his personality that we see only in glimpses.

Patsy's nickname, like Sixo's, makes her equally larger than life. By her designation as the "Thirty-Mile Woman," her indication of value becomes greater than that assessed by the slave system under which she lives. She is the possibility for family ("Sixo was hell-bent to make [a family] with the Thirty-Mile Woman" [219]) and freedom, concepts antithetical to slavery but clearly the guiding forces in the lives of those enslaved. With this value attached to her, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the Thirty-Mile Woman is a girl of fourteen—a prize, certainly, during slavery, but the elevation of her before we know her age leads us to anticipate something more, perhaps that she is a wise older woman, capable of extraordinary feats. Her ordinariness highlights the process of transformation into legend that takes place in the novel.

Sethe also assumes her share of the legendary status of Sweet Home residents. It is difficult for most people to understand how she managed to escape from the Garner plantation without provisions and six months pregnant. There must have been something superhuman, if not otherworldly, in her determination. That quality is reflected in her eyes, which are frequently depicted as being totally black to indicate how absorbed Sethe can become in the tasks or memories at hand. It is a quality that Sethe exhibits in her insistence that she is a mother in a world that would declare otherwise. She lives that determination, thereby giving Denver a chance to see her legendary attributes in the next generation. Denver's image of Sethe is that of a "queenly woman" who controls herself, responds calmly to emergencies, and stares everything, including death, in the face:

> The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer's restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either. And when the baby's spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocated his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away. She had taken a hammer, knocked the dog unconscious, wiped away the blood and saliva, pushed his eye back in his head and set his leg bones. (12)

Legendary status becomes, to some extent, the nature of survival for slaves and newly freed blacks. To desire to live as a free person was in itself something extraordinary, and to reach that objective—through one's own initiative—was beyond the imaginations of most slaves; those who did so could only be viewed as larger than life.

Not only are people from Sweet Home made into legends, but inanimate things and animals are as well. Just as Sweet Home is almost a tangible memory to Sethe, so are specific places and trees on the plantation; the very air is special, almost bewitched.

> [T]here was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

Brother, one of the trees, not only provided shade (21, 224) for the Pauls, Halle, and Sixo, but it was anthropomorphized into one of them. The tree became a brother, fit partner in conversation as Miss Jane Pittman talked to trees in Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974). When Paul D is taken away to prison, his last look is toward Brother (106); in prison, he cultivates another tree, a small sapling, unlike the "old, wide and beckoning" (221) Brother, but serving a purpose nonetheless. Brother is the objectification of love, a tangible substitute for the absence of women at Sweet Home, as well as a method of communing with forces larger than Paul D. The sapling in Alfred, Georgia, is a way for Paul D to focus on something to love just a little bit in order to retain some semblance of his humanity. The value Paul D places on trees is clear in this elevating conclusion he draws about Brother and Sixo at one point: "Now *there* was a man, and *that* was a tree" (22).

Mister, the rooster at Sweet Home, is an objectification of freedom and a metaphor for manhood. As the rooster swaggers around the barnyard, strutting for the hens present, he has more freedom and control over his

existence than Paul D. As that freedom and sexual interplay get interpreted, Mister is also more "man" than Paul D, more human—in the sense of having a separate, individual identity—than human beings who are slaves. In popular definitions of maleness, Mister is ultimately the "cock" that Paul D can never become. It is that irony that makes the sight of Mister so painful for Paul D when he is wearing the iron bit in his mouth. Memory for Paul D is the image of a rooster who is freer than he has been, a rooster who has been helped out of his shell because he had been abandoned by his mother. That failing notwithstanding, Mister had reached—and perhaps extended—his full potential as a male member of his species, something that has been unavailable to Paul D. Mister established his place in the barnyard lore by whipping "everything in the yard" (72).

The particularly poignant scene of Mister sitting on a tub and gazing at Paul D when he is wearing the bit is an occasion when inequality is made tangible and when spatial positioning signals to Paul D how incredibly devalued he is.

> "Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was . . ." Paul D stopped and squeezed his left hand with his right. He held it that way long enough for it and the world to quiet down and let him go on.
>
> "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub." (72)

As he relates his memories of Sweet Home to Sethe, Paul D is remembering Mister's metaphysical position in that world as much as he is remembering a neglected chicken carving out a space for himself. Mister had been able to compete on an equal level with the other roosters in the barnyard; Paul D is forced outside the arena of competition, without the ability even to respond to those who are manipulating him.

Mister, like Brother, acquires a quasi-human status for Paul D when he describes the world that has had such an impact upon his life. As memory gets meshed with imagination, it perhaps looms larger than fact, and it leads more naturally to the shaping of legends. Imagination also serves to explain the demise of Sweet Home. Others may claim that Garner had a heart attack or a stroke and was brought home dead on his horse. Sixo maintains that he was killed ("Sixo had a knowing tale about everything.

Including Mr. Garner's stroke, which he said was a shot in his ear put there by a jealous neighbor" [219]), precisely for those traits that identified him as being special. No longer able to tolerate his nonconformity, one of his neighbors had simply shot him in a ritualized restoration of the status quo. Ironically, the shooting reduces Garner to the status of a slave in that his life becomes just as devalued. In suggesting that Sixo's explanation for Garner's death is the preferred one, Morrison consigns Sweet Home and its people to a land where reality is indeed large enough to contain myth and legend.

Notes

1. The volume depends upon stereotypical conceptions of women, but it is nonetheless an interesting historical recapitulation of traditional perceptions of femaleness; Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968).

2. Daryl C. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 56–57.

3. Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation," *Southern Review* 21 (July 1985): 593. While this comment could apply to the writing practice Morrison gained in her previous novels in preparation for writing the difficult tale of a mother killing her child, it could also apply to touching briefly on the unorthodox ideas that would inform the substance of *Beloved*. See pp. 583–84 of the above interview for Morrison's discussion of the two incidents that shaped the idea for *Beloved*: that of Margaret Garner, the slave woman who preferred death rather than slavery for her children, and that of an eighteen-year-old dead girl photographed in Harlem by James Van der Zee; the girl had sacrificed her own life in order to allow the jealous lover who had shot her sufficient time to escape the scene of the crime.

4. See "Daid Aaron," in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1958), 175–78.

5. Jean Strouse, "Toni Morrison's Magic," *Newsweek* (30 March 1981): 54.

6. Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 16.

7. Indeed, some of the comments that Charles Scruggs makes about desire in *Song of Solomon* could also apply to *Beloved*. See "The Nature of Desire in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Arizona Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1982): 311–35.

8. While Terry Otten also recognizes Beloved's demonic nature and the fact that she is "an evil thing," he asserts that she may be "a Christ figure come to save," "the 'beloved' one come to reclaim Sethe and from whom Sethe seeks forgiveness." See Otten, *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1989), 84, 85. In *Toni Morrison* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) Wilfred D.

Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, assert that Paul D is a Christ figure (134). Instead of this designation, with its attendant connotation of absolute goodness, perhaps it would be more productive to view Paul D in the ambivalent mode of some of Morrison's earlier heroes, such as Milkman and Son.

9. For a discussion of the multiple voices and characters Beloved represents in the novel, see Deborah Horvitz, "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 17 (Autumn 1989): 157–67. On the other hand, Elizabeth B. House, in "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved," *Studies in American Fiction* 18 (Spring 1990): 17–26, argues that Beloved is not a ghost but merely a runaway who has suffered the blights of slavery. These in turn intersect coincidentally with Sethe's relationship to her deceased daughter.

10. Otten comments that "in attacking [Bodwin], Sethe achieves an exorcism; in saving Beloved by offering herself, she at last frees herself from the demonic presence that will not release her from the past. Once Sethe acts to save Beloved, retestifying to her love, the ghost disappears"; *The Crime of Innocence*, 94.

11. See Wayland D. Hand, ed., *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, vol. 7 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964), 144, 145, 147. Dog ghosts are also painted in the lore as being some of the most benign spirits humans can encounter. See J. Mason Brewer, *Dog Ghosts and Other Texas Negro Folk Tales* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1958).

12. See Hughes and Bontemps, "De Ways of De Wimmens," in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, 130–35, and Hurston, "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men," in Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1935/1978), 33–38.

13. See Hughes and Bontemps, eds. *The Book of Negro Folklore*.

14. See David A. Stanley, "The Personal Narrative and the Personal Novel: Folklore as Frame and Structure for Literature," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 43 (1979): 39–62.

15. Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," *Thought* 59 (Dec. 1984): 388–89.

16. Earlier in her career, Morrison commented that she worked to achieve that effect in her work: "To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken . . . is what's important"; see her "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Edition*, ed. Mari Evans, 341.

17. Mel Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison," *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 11, 1977, 48.

18. Thomas LeClair, "'The Language Must Not Sweat': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *The New Republic* 184 (March 21, 1981): 27.

19. Samuels and Hudson-Weems also refer to Baby Suggs as a "ritual priestess," which also brings to mind secular rather than Christian connotations; *Toni Morrison*, 117.

20. For a discussion of the importance of such rites, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1908; rpt., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960).

21. Of course it could be argued that Baby Suggs retains a somewhat legendary, positive effect upon Denver, who uses memories of her as a touchstone of sanity when she contemplates the circumstances at 124 Bluestone Road.

22. "Master's Gone to Philly-Me-York," in Richard M. Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1967), 151–52, and Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 88–89. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Party," in *The Collected Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1967), 134–38.

23. Morrison has defended this tendency by commenting: "Sometimes I have been accused—or complimented, I'm not sure—of writing about people who are bigger than life. I was always befuddled by that observation, and I still am a little bit. But I felt that I was writing about people who were as big as life, not bigger than. Life is very big. There are people who try to make it small, safe, unexamined. If some of my characters are as big as the life they have, they may seem enormous exaggerations, but [only to] a reader whose sense of life is more diminished than mine"; in Amanda Smith's interview, "Toni Morrison," *Publishers Weekly*, Aug. 21, 1987, 51.

24. Terry Otten adopts Hannah Arendt's term in calling the Garners "nice Nazis": "The Garners were kindhearted people but also participants in the system—nice Nazis, but Nazis nonetheless. By their accommodation of slavery, they made possible the prototypal evil of schoolteacher"; *The Crime of Innocence*, 86.