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Ten Minutes for Seven Letters: Reading *Beloved's* Epitaph

You haven't really read something until you've read it as an epitaph, said a friend of a friend of mine to whom I told this title. Tell them that.

Cynthia Chase

“TELL THEM THAT.” The last reported words from an anonymous “friend of a friend.” Taken by itself, the command raises ambiguity to its highest level—the imperative for someone to tell something to others. Read contextually, the implied “you” of the imperative “Tell” is Cynthia Chase. The “them” is the audience at the 1993 New York University conference “Deconstruction is/in America” listening to Chase’s “Reading Epitaphs” presentation. The “that” is “You haven’t really read something until you’ve read it as an epitaph.” Yet the “that” of Chase’s related comment raises even more questions: what is an epitaph? How does one read it? How and why does this reading differ from normal reading—or rather, how does reading something as an epitaph constitute reading in its essence such that texts read otherwise aren’t “really read”? And how can something that is not an epitaph be read as an epitaph?

One can begin to approach the dilemmas posed by the idea of reading epitaphs by observing that to read something as an epitaph, as written on a gravestone, is, first of all, to make the relationship between language and death explicit—epitaphs are always curious types of dead letters that mediate the relationship between the living and the dead. Reading something as an epitaph forces one to consider the strange materiality of language, the way in which the sign can persist in the absence of both its producer and addressee. The epitaph marks a site of

memory, a powerful zone of contact between the living and the dead. It performs the complicated function of calling to mind the departed as departed, that is, of foregrounding the present absence of the beloved. To read the epitaph is to remember its referent, to conjure the dead, while at the same time to be struck by the ephemerality of living. The materiality, the weightiness, the persistence of words literally etched in stone contrast with the fleetingness and fragility of life.

However, can one ever really “read” an epitaph? If the epitaph functions to refer beyond itself, to call to mind the departed, then to read the text of the epitaph as *text*, divorced from its referential function, is not to read it as epitaph. To read an epitaph as a poem, for instance, to celebrate the beauty of its composition rather than to reflect on the absence of the deceased, is not to read it as an epitaph. Contrarily, to read the epitaph as epitaph, as that which commemorates the deceased and insistently gestures towards the present absence of its referent, is not to read the epitaph as text. The question of reading the epitaph therefore introduces an ethical dimension to reading. Is it ethical to consider an epitaph as “literature” and to perform the same critical analyses and manipulations one might apply to, say, a “normal” poem? Can an epitaph be aestheticized and still be an epitaph? The reverse of this question also applies, especially in light of my *epigraph*: can one consider the “normal” poem as *epitaph*? At bottom here is the vexed question of the relationship of language to that which exists outside language. If, as Hegel suggests, the word is the death of the thing, then is not every word, in some sense, an epitaph? The imperative to read as epitaph suggests that somehow reading is connected to absence, that to read is always to recognize or undergo an experience of loss.

In order to approach the subject of spectrality in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and its relation to language and to the possibility of justice for the living and the dead, one must start with the complex mediation performed by the epitaph, because, from start to finish, *Beloved* is a story about an epitaph, the name “Beloved,” “the one word that mattered” etched into “dawn-colored stone” (5). Everything in *Beloved*, from title to last word, circles around the name, the ways in which the word “beloved” connotes both the most intense intimacy and communal gatherings, the celebration of new life together and the sundering of bonds by death. To read *Beloved*’s epitaph, to read *Beloved* as epitaph, is to confront the haunting limitations of language and to engage in a

process of mourning that inevitably will fail to capture or reconstitute the other. However, the frightening recognition of loss that the epitaph compels serves as the precondition for learning to live and for the opening of the future as something other than a repetition of the present.

TEN MINUTES FOR SEVEN LETTERS

What Derrida says in *Given Time* of Baudelaire's short story "Counterfeit Money," that "it is as if the text did nothing but play with its title" (97), can also be said of Morrison's *Beloved*. From start to finish, as Deborah Horvitz has observed, Morrison's text is "enveloped" by the presence of a problematic name—the epitaph "Beloved" carved onto the gravestone of Sethe's "crawling already?" baby, named only in death (157). Prostituting her body to the engraver, "her knees wide open as any grave," Sethe exchanges "ten minutes for seven letters" (5), ten minutes of sex for the inscription of the word "Beloved" on the tombstone of her murdered child. This complicated transaction functions as a nexus of sex, time, and writing, love, lust, hatred, and death. It thus figures in microcosm many of the key terms of the text as a whole.¹ Sethe, in this relationship of exchange, is the lover, her dead child, the beloved, and the engraver the third party who will mediate this relationship between living and dead through language. The relationship between Sethe and her departed child is contrasted with the relationship between Sethe and the engraver, which is not one of tenderness but of tender, of capital. What this contrast foregrounds is the insistent theme of Morrison's text that there is no beloved of a transaction. One of the most dramatic movements of Morrison's text is its insistence that love relationships must exist outside of the economy of exchange and possession.

The irony of the phrase "ten minutes for seven letters" lies in the disparate valuations of the epitaph to the engraver, to Sethe, and to the reader. The seven letters that she chooses mean nothing more to the engraver than the opportunity to vent his lust, while they, as epitaph, as "the one word that mattered" from the preacher's eulogy, as an expression of love, mean significantly more to Sethe—a value not reducible to a cost per letter. And, beyond Sethe's desire to remember her daughter, these same seven letters govern the entire momentum of the text for the reader, serving as its title, the text's last word, and designating one of its central characters. The overwhelming irony of the reduction

of "Beloved" to ten minutes is most evident when one observes that Beloved herself is symbolic of the "sixty million and more" Africans who died during the Middle Passage of slavery. The whole structure of Morrison's text works to counter this tragic reduction that seeks to measure lives in terms of minutes (in this respect, it is significant that Beloved's tombstone bears no dates), or to calculate the value of lives in terms of units of material exchange.

The overdetermination of the epitaph "beloved" functions on several levels to foreground the mediation of language between self and other and living and dead. As Caroline Rody observes, the term "expresses at once the greatest anonymity and the dearest specificity" (104). It is the private name each person gives to his or her most intimate relations and personal treasures. However, in addition to serving as "an address conferred by the lover on the object of affection," the term "beloved" also names everyone in the impersonal rhetoric of the Church and, as noted by May G. Henderson, is "used in matrimonial and eulogistic discourse, both commemorative, linguistic events: the former prefiguring the future, the latter refiguring the past" (67). In the "Dearly Beloved" of the marriage ceremony and the funeral eulogy, the term "beloved" unites the celebrants or mourners in a present moment of anticipation or commemoration. In its public contexts, it functions simultaneously in two capacities, marking both the specific relationship of the affianced to each other or the bereaved to the deceased, and the general relation of the Church to all. In its various uses, the term thus connects public with private, the intimacy of the individual love relationship with communal gatherings of both celebration and grief. The term also structures a tension between the timeless present of one's most intimate encounters and the communal marking of time through the remembrance of significant events in the lives of individuals—particularly the joining of marriage and the passing of death. The use of the term, at least in its public contexts, thereby marks a vacillation, a wavering in time, the fullness of a present marked by a past—and an openness to a future beyond the event.

The name "Beloved" thus acts on several levels, as Valerie Smith remarks, as "a site where a number of oppositions are interrogated" (350). As an epitaph on a tombstone, the "public inscription of a private memorial" (Henderson 67), as well as an element of Church rhetoric and a term that everyone deploys to identify her or his own most

intimate relations, it serves to link public to private. In its use in public contexts, it serves to foreground the presentness of both the past and the future. However, as Smith observes, the word "beloved" itself is a site of opposition and ambiguity. "Simultaneously adjective and noun, the word [sic] problematizes the distinction between the characteristics of a thing and the thing itself" (350).

This instability of the word, a word that deprived of context can be either noun or adjective, that vacillates in time, that figures both intimate moments and public gathering, arises from the fact that, as Morrison's text is well aware, "beloved," by itself, is nothing. For there to be a beloved, or for someone to be beloved, there must be a lover. Conversely, if there is a lover, there must be a beloved. Herein lies the ambiguity and imperative of Morrison's title: the starkness of this overdetermined epitaph demands some sort of context. Beloved of whom? Morrison's text does a neat spin on this question by making both it and its inverse, "who is Beloved?" two of the most important questions of the text. The answers to both these questions replicate the tendency of the term "beloved" itself to vacillate between private and public, to slip beyond the borders of any singular context.

The term "beloved" thereby functions metonymically, always gesturing beyond itself toward some other term. Separated from the rest of the preacher's funeral eulogy, "Beloved" points backward to "Dearly" and forward to the rest of the oration. Sethe wonders, "With another ten could she have gotten 'Dearly' too?" (5). What Sethe is able to purchase with her body is a link from a longer chain of language addressed to the community in general. Her extraction of the term "beloved" from the rest of the funeral eulogy, her mistaking the "Dearly Beloved" as an address to her dead child rather than to the assembled crowd (Rody 104), and, finally, the decontextualized "Beloved" of the epitaph, function as failures of language—failures that figure the complex relationship of public to private in the novel and implicate the community in the circumstances of her daughter's demise and subsequent return—that complicate but do not efface Sethe's own accountability for her actions.

The text of *Beloved* enacts a movement from public to private as Sethe withdraws from the world following Beloved's return, and then shifts from private back to public as Denver steps out into the yard

to seek assistance from the community—the same community initially connected to the events leading up to primal scene of *Beloved*'s murder. What is important about this is that *Beloved* is thus both Sethe's personal ghost and a communal problem. Indeed, *Beloved*'s return and expulsion ultimately result in the reintegration of Denver, and, to a certain extent, Sethe, into the community. The return of the dead thus acts on a personal level for Sethe as the disruption of social bonds and simultaneously acts on a communal level as an imperative toward cooperation and healing.

Beloved, as a ghost story, turns on the various significations and resonances of its title. To read *Beloved*, one therefore must engage in the vexing task of reading epitaphs—which is to allow oneself to be haunted by the absence toward which the epitaph gestures. This situation is made even more complicated by Morrison's use of the term "beloved" to designate both one and many. Caroline Rody observes that, although the name "Beloved" refers to everyone in the rhetoric of the Church and names everyone who is intimately loved, it "does not name the forgotten" (104). She continues, "Morrison has the name perform precisely this last function; the novel's defining conceit is to call the unnamed 'beloved.' Part of *Beloved*'s strangeness derives, then, from the emotional burden she carries as a symbolic compression of innumerable forgotten people in one miraculously resurrected personality, the remembering of the 'sixty million' in one youthful body" (104).

What Rody refers to as *Beloved*'s "strangeness," the fact that she simultaneously incarnates the return of Sethe's murdered child and symbolizes the African holocaust of the Middle Passage, the "Sixty Million and more" of Morrison's dedication, one might also consider as the complexity of the novel itself, its allegorical overlay. *Beloved*, inseparable from her name, is both one and many, and *Beloved* the ghost, like "beloved" the epitaph, mediates between private and public, self and other, and living and dead. The haunting she performs pushes Sethe, her community, and the reader toward the momentous recognition of the possibility of loss and, as a result, introduces the necessity of mourning—mourning that fails to domesticate the strangeness of absence and thereby introduces a "chance for the future."

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURATION OF HAUNTING

Avery Gordon, in her *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, insists that "haunting is a constitutive feature of social life" (23). A haunting describes "how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence" (8). Gordon explains, "A disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us" (63). The ghost, in other words, functions as the trace of an absent presence, the "evidence of things not seen" (195). And, as Gordon points out, only that which has not been completely forgotten can return as a ghost. Ghosts are products of uneasy minds—of problematic knowing—not complete ignorance.

In the case of the specific story of Sethe's murder of her daughter, Beloved can be read as the return of Sethe's murdered "crawling already?" baby. However, to read Beloved's return as solely the "return of the repressed" of Sethe is mistaken. As Sally Keenan observes, "Sethe has not forgotten either her daughter or the fact that she killed her . . . suggesting that remembering or acknowledgment is not the problem, but, rather, how to forget, how to lay the past to rest, is" (71).² Importantly, this past is not purely Sethe's past, nor can she "lay it to rest" on her own. Indeed, the moral dilemma intrinsic in the attempt to judge Sethe's actions—a difficulty evident in the ways in which the huge mass of critical literature carefully evades even the question of Sethe's accountability for her crime—lies in the complex web of social forces that result in the act.³ Sethe's "rough response to the Fugitive Slave Bill" (171), her decision to kill her children rather than allow them to be remanded back into slavery, is the culmination of her personal experience as a black woman living in the social context of the existence of black slavery. She is placed in an impossible situation—the only way to keep her children is to lose them, the only place where they will be safe is in death (164). Additionally, her actions also result from the failure of the black community to warn the residents of 124 of the approaching horsemen. Jan Furman observes that the black community in *Beloved* "fails its obligation" to Sethe when it "betrays Baby Suggs and her family by failing to warn of what they instinctively know is trouble" (72). This failure of communication is then continued when Sethe extracts the

one word "beloved" from the funeral eulogy and uses it, at least in part, as a *weapon* against the community, as an answer to "one more preacher, one more abolitionist, and a town full of disgust" (5).

Sethe's actions, therefore, cannot be excised from the social context in which they occur, and the return of Beloved, the presence of the ghost, the "fearful claim of the past on the present" (Rody 104), is not an isolated event affecting Sethe, but a social phenomenon implicating the community and the culture at large that facilitated Sethe's action. Beloved's return affects the community since it, through "spite, jealousy, and meanness" (Furman 72), allowed the conditions for Sethe's act to develop. Ultimately, it is the community that must come together at the end of the novel to expel Beloved, which points to the social constitution of haunting and the collective nature of memory itself.

That haunting is a social phenomenon is most readily apparent in *Beloved* when one considers Beloved as the symbol for the millions who died during the Middle Passage. As Gordon observes, *Beloved* "is about the lingering inheritance of racial slavery, the unfinished project of Reconstruction, and the compulsions and forces that all of us inevitably experience in the face of slavery's having even once existed in our nation. Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about" (139). Beyond the particular story of the return of Sethe's murdered child, beyond even the implication of Sethe's community in her crime and its results, *Beloved*, as a contemporary ghost story, as an effort at "reclamation" (Morrison, "A Conversation" 199), is the attempt to address a contemporary haunting, the social trauma of slavery that lives on in American culture. Implicit in Morrison's project of reclamation of black history is the objective of healing. Keenan remarks that "If Beloved's spectral return into the slave family represents within the narrative the eruption of that which has lived on as memory but has remained unspoken, the text, *Beloved*, signals a current discursive renegotiation with their history by African Americans which amounts to a contestation of the ways that past has been erased or subsumed within the historical discourse of hegemonic culture" (48). Reclaiming or revisioning this history in the present is thus proposed as part of a healing process directed at the wounds of a traumatic past. However, as I will argue below, the most dramatic recognition prompted by Beloved's uncanny irruption is that the forgotten, and, by extension, the past itself, cannot be recovered or

recover. The opening of a future-yet-to-come, a future different from that which can be envisioned today, is contingent upon learning to read epitaphs, on learning to preserve the alterity of the other by mourning the lostness of the lost.

THE OPPRESSED PAST

Caroline Rody writes that "*Beloved* is manifestly about the filling of historical gaps" (93) and suggests that one consider fiction such as *Beloved* as "structures of historiographic desire," that is, as "attempts to span a vast gap of time, loss, and ignorance to achieve an intimate bond, a bridge of restitution or healing, between the authorial present and the ancestral past" (97). Morrison herself speaks of this process as one of "assuming responsibility" ("In the Realm" 247) for the forgotten and the dispossessed. This responsibility is one of "artistically burying" the unburied ("A Conversation" 209), that Morrison acknowledges as "just one step" in the process of the reclamation of black history ("Interview With Toni Morrison" 413). However, the pressing questions here are how does one remember the forgotten? How can one bear witness to what one has not experienced? And to what extent can a work of *fiction*, a ghost story, participate in these endeavors?

In an interview with Christina Davis, Morrison explains that:

The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. It's a serious responsibility and one single human being can only do a very very tiny part of that, but it seems to me to be both secular and non-secular work for a writer. ("Interview with Toni Morrison" 413)

Morrison is thus participating in, to quote Walter Benjamin, the "fight for the oppressed past" ("Theses" 263). She recognizes, with Hortense Spillers, that "[Events] *do* occur, to be sure, but in part according to the conventions dictating how we receive, imagine, and pass them on" (176). This is to say that there are multiple perspectives on any given

event and one perspective assumes prominence only at the expense of other, competing interpretations. In the rewriting of the event, the revisioning of history that the ghost prompts, Gordon observes that, "a different story or history is made possible" (163). For Gordon, the encounter with the ghost is the moment at which one no longer can stand divorced from history and objectively survey its field. Rather, in experiencing a haunting, the wheels of history stop and one is faced with uncertainty, with the disturbing realization that something is missing, that the story is incomplete.

The ghost, as the trace of an absent presence, thus has ethical ramifications for Gordon; it is both "the symptom of something missing" and a "loss," but also "a future possibility, a hope" (64). It can "lead you toward what has been missing" (58) and "mak[e] you see things you did not see before" (98). Ultimately, it "forces a reckoning" (139). The ghost as such is a "living force" (179) that pushes those who encounter it toward a "something to be done" (203). Yet how can a work of fiction, a ghost story, participate in the task of historical reclamation and prompt this something to be done? How can *Beloved* fight for the oppressed past?

In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Morrison comments explicitly on the line between history and fiction in her writing, a negotiation that she describes as "literary archeology." She writes, "on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth" (112). Morrison thus attempts to reconstitute a life from an epitaph—in a sense, to summon spirits—to imagine what is missing based on the remains.

Intriguingly, in this process of imaginative reconstruction, Morrison does not oppose truth and fiction. Rather, she writes, "the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (113). To gain access to the interior life of historical subjects, to "rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (110), to get at the *truth* of historical silences and forgettings, "Only the act of the imagination can help" (111). Attempting to get at the truth, to do justice to the dispossessed, and,

in the process, to live more justly oneself, therefore depends precisely upon the act of imagining. What Morrison indicates is that sometimes fiction paradoxically can be more "truthful" than facts. Or rather, the imagination "animates the remains," brings "dead" facts to life in such a way so as to turn "inhuman" facts into a living narrative. The imagination thereby provides a framework for learning, for comprehending undigestable facts. And yet to read a story as epitaph is to remember not only that any story is never the whole story, that the real, the other, always exceeds, escapes language, but also that the imaginative animation of the remains cannot help but to foreground what is missing. The task of recovery, of reclamation, therefore also entails a letting go, a recognition of loss, and healing, learning to live for the future, requires a mourning of and for the past. Reading epitaphs is both about remembering the dead and remembering to live before one joins them. Reading epitaphs is about summoning spirits and coming to terms with ghosts, not about exorcising them.

LEARNING TO LIVE

In this respect, philosopher Jacques Derrida's comments in the "Exordium" to his *Specters of Marx* are particularly striking. Derrida begins by writing, "someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*" (xvii)—a remarkably strange turn of phrase, as Derrida himself notes. Why does anyone need to learn this? And how? And from whom? And why "finally"? The phrase implies that one can be alive without living, that, paradoxically, living needs to be learned, and that this learning is a task. The weight that Derrida places on this task is suggested by the finality of the "finally": at the end of it all, after having lived without living—or having forgotten how to live—to be left with living. The finality of "finally" implies that one can only learn to live by encountering the end, the limit of life, by and through death, through "com[ing] to terms with death" (xviii). Derrida writes, "If it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor death *alone*" (xviii). Life, by itself, is meaningless. Without the fact of mortality, learning to live is impossible, for life would not be a gift, and living would lack all urgency. For Derrida, this task of learning to live is "ethics itself" (xviii) and "has no sense and cannot be *just* unless it comes to terms with death" (xviii).

Learning to live and coming to terms with death can only happen in the between, in an uncanny space between life and death—which is the space and time of the ghost. Derrida continues, “What happens between two, and between all the ‘two’s’ one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost [s’entretenir de quelque fantôme]. So it would be necessary to learn spirits” (xviii). Learning to live thus means to “learn spirits,” to learn to live *with* spirits, which is to learn to live with a restless past and one’s own being-towards-death. And this “being-with specters,” this acceptance of spirits, which also amounts to a “*politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xix), allows one to live “otherwise” and “more justly” (xviii)—because justice entails a responsibility both to the dead and the still to be born: “No justice . . . seems possible or thinkable without some *responsibility*, beyond all living present . . . before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (xix).

Derrida goes on to identify the classes of these already dead to which one owes some debt, toward which one bears some responsibility: “victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (xix). The ghosts that come back to haunt, “these unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried” dead (Morrison, “A Conversation” 209), victims of the most extreme acts of violence, raise the question of the possibility of justice in its starkest form—how can justice be served? How can one discharge a debt to the dead? How can hurt be undone? These are not happy spirits or friendly ghosts that return. The question that Derrida raises here—and that *Beloved* forcefully engages—is the question of how to live with these spirits, victims of brutal violence, victims of the Middle Passage. How does one live with a history or an inheritance that is too painful or shameful to be remembered—one that an individual or a community or an entire culture desperately wishes to forget—and yet which is too important to be forgotten? How can one do justice to the dead and, if this is the task that is required to live justly, or to learn to live at all, is learning to live even possible?

For Derrida, the opening of the future as something other than a repetition of the present is dependent precisely upon the work of mourning, and, importantly, on mourning that never succeeds fully in

working through or domesticating the trauma of loss, mourning that fails in "introjecting" the absent loved one. The absence of the other remains and this absence, this loss, can never be filled with words, can never itself be articulated completely. The epitaph gestures toward the absence that remains.⁴ Against this absence of the other, narcissism reaches a limit as "we realize that, will what we might, we cannot rewrite the other back into life, remaking history so that she is still with us. She is gone. In her very absence we feel the pull of otherness" (Cornell 73). One can remember, but not recall to life. For Derrida, one cannot eliminate the absence of the other that propels one to mourn.

However, as Drucilla Cornell notes, "Ironically, it is only through this failure to fully recollect the Other that we 'succeed' in mourning the Other as Other" (73). To mourn the "Other as Other" is to recognize the otherness of the other, to understand, in a sense, the fullness of the other that exceeds all knowing, overflows all attempts at circumscription and containment. Derrida writes, "we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory. With the nothing of this irrevocable absence, the other appears as other" (*Memoires* 34). The absence of the other that cannot be overcome points to a fullness of the other that cannot be recreated by memory or language. The recognition of this loss, this absence that remains is, according to Derrida, a strange type of success, a gesture of respect toward the otherness of the other: "the *failure succeeds*: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation that leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside us" (*Memoires* 35).

In mourning, one confronts the "remains," the "beyond," that which exists outside of systems of representation, that which resists conscious knowing, resists articulation—that which can only be experienced as loss. But, as Cornell writes, "it is the very failure of mourning as mimetic interiorization that allows us to attempt fidelity to the remains. The inevitable failure of memory to enclose the Other, opens us to the 'beyond'" (73). Mourning thus becomes both crucial and, in a sense, impossible. One must grapple with absence, with the past, knowing that loss can never be eliminated or overcome fully. This painful experience of loss and the resistant residue of otherness opens one to the "beyond," to the recognition of incompleteness, to the recogni-

tion of the limitations of signifying systems, and to the frightening yet potentially liberating prospect of other ways of thinking. An openness to or opening of the beyond is the openness to difference, to a different future, a future yet-to-come.⁵ Only where the possibility of loss exists can things be found. Cornell concludes that, “the chance for the future . . . is preserved in the work of mourning which ironically remembers the remains through the experience of the limit of interiorization, through the very finitude of memory that makes ‘true’ mourning impossible, and yet so necessary” (75).

Justice, in Cornell’s reading of Derrida, is “our singular responsibility to the Other” (143), and “doing justice” to the *memory* of the other takes place through incomplete mourning, through the absence of the other that remains, through the otherness of the other that resists assimilation to the same. *Beloved*, I suggest, in its attempt to do justice to the memory of the lost and dispossessed, is not about the process of filling in historical gaps, as Caroline Rody contends (93). Nor is it a project of “historical recovery” (Krumholz 395). Both these descriptions imply that a coherent, singular, “truthful” narrative of history could be established if only certain missing pieces could be unearthed. A project of “historical recovery” suggests that history is in some sense an organic body, sick or lost, but potentially sound, whole, and present.⁶

On the contrary, Morrison’s narrative suggests that history will not recover, that, as Morgenstern asserts, there is “no easy cure” (117), and I do not believe that *Beloved* is about the “filling in” of anything. I suggest that it is instead about loss, about emptiness, about emptying. To the extent that it is about recovery, it is precisely about first recovering or experiencing the “beyond” as *loss*: the loss of history and history as loss. This process of recovering lostness, as opposed to the filling in of gaps, means to recognize and appreciate gaps as gaps, to recognize the terrifying fact that some things *can* be lost forever. It necessitates a coming to grips with the fact that certainty is never possible, and that action must take place precisely in the *absence* of cognitive mastery. Finally, the idea of filling in gaps—which I would describe as the denial of the possibility of loss—is also the attempt to side-step the painful process of mourning—indeed, to avoid the frightening prospect of an interminable mourning that will never succeed fully in “closing the circle” around lost experience. But it is this encounter with lostness and the necessity of mourning that are crucial if the opening of a

different future is to be envisioned. Morrison's text, I suggest, in juxtaposing Sethe's "recovery" of narrative with *Beloved's* breakdown of narrative, proposes that it is only by *having* loss, owning lostness, that one can avoid *being lost* altogether. Ghosts in this sense are symptomatic of failures of mourning, the failure to recognize loss. The ghost points to a gap, a loss, an absence. *Beloved* demands that one mourn the lost as lost, to preserve their lostness, their disappearance, even as one seeks to "resurrect" their stories—to remember the lost in their lostness so as to open the possibility of a different future—a just future, a future of justice yet-to-come.

NECESSARY IMPOSSIBLE TELLING

Alongside of the specific story of Sethe's murder of *Beloved*, there is another story, a twofold tragedy of disappearance and forgetting—the deaths of the "sixty million and more" Africans during the Middle Passage. Baby Suggs points out to Sethe, "There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time" (244). Of these millions, Morrison writes, "No one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States or Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea" (qtd. in Furman 80). It is from this place of forgetting that *Beloved* emerges and, as Karla Holloway observes, she is "not only Sethe's dead daughter returned, but the return[ed] of all the faces, all the drowned, but remembered, faces of mothers and their children who have lost their being because of the force of that EuroAmerican slave-history" (ibid.).⁷ Or, as Susan Bowers concisely puts it, "*Beloved* is the embodiment of the collective pain and rage of the millions of slaves who died on the Middle Passage" (66). But Morrison's attempt at reclamation, at remembering the disremembered, at telling the story of the forgotten again raises the issue of her distinction between truth and fact and the issue of the ethics of memory. How can Morrison use fiction in the "fight for the oppressed past"? How can Morrison do justice to the departed? And, in reference to historical catastrophes such as slavery, is it in fact ethical to attempt to reintegrate the events into narrative memory, to force them into stable, communicable, comprehensible con-

figurations? Cathy Caruth raises these same questions in her discussion of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* when she poses the questions of the ethics of narration and of how not to “betray” the past (*Unclaimed* 27). What Caruth proposes, following Shoshana Felman and Claude Lanzmann, is that the possibility of a “faithful” history arises out of an “indirectness of telling” (27) and a “creative act of listening” (Introduction 154). As numerous critics have noted, *Beloved* provides the former and demands the latter.

Beloved is not a text that progresses from start to finish in a linear fashion. Neither does it have a singular, stable narrator. Rather, like Sethe in her kitchen, attempting to tell Paul D something for which she has no words, for which words fail—why she killed her daughter—the text “circles” around its subjects. Philip Page remarks that “[Sethe] cannot say directly what she did or why, so the narration does not tell the story directly The novel is like the circle Sethe spins, collecting, omitting, repeating fragments It tends to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then circle back with more information about the initial fact, then veer away again, circle back again, and so on” (140–41). And part of the novel’s “obliqueness” (141) is its multiple and overlapping points of view. This “deviousness” (141) of the text, the resistance of the narrative, is most evident during the middle section of the text in which identity dissolves as the voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved intertwine, and especially during Beloved’s monologue, in which the text itself threatens to unwind altogether.⁸

What *Beloved*’s disarticulated monologue reveals is the impossibility of telling, the impossibility of recovering the stories of the dispossessed, of explaining the horror of the Middle Passage, of articulating death. Morgenstern observes that, “What most needs to be said in the novel defies narrative form” (118), and *Beloved*’s monologue is the moment in the story when the text literally falls apart through the introduction of spatial gaps and the absence of punctuation. Here, where logic fails, the historical power of trauma is experienced in and through the experience of a gap, of a not knowing. Valerie Smith writes that, “this section of the novel resists explication. It prompts, rather, the recognition that what is essentially and effectively unspoken can never be conveyed and comprehended linguistically” (352). Mobley proposes that the literal gaps left in the text during this section “signal the timelessness of [Beloved’s] presence as well as the un-lived spaces of her life” (362),

but they also figure the resistance of trauma to telling, of the secrets of the unknown to being solved.⁹ One might wish to consider Beloved's monologue figuring both her individual death and the Middle Passage of slavery as the horrific Middle Passage of both the text and of language itself. Her monologue actualizes on the levels of text and language fears of fragmentation, of exploding and being swallowed up (133). On this leaky ship of language, meaning slips away through the cracks.

However, one may ask, as Derrida does of translation, what if this "disadjustment," this disarticulation of the text, is in fact the very condition of attempting to do justice to the victims—or the memory of the victims—of the Middle Passage? (*Specters* 19–20). What Morrison avoids doing in Beloved's monologue is making any attempt at rendering either Beloved's experience of death or the deaths of millions readily intelligible. Rather than to try to represent coherently horror that exceeds intelligible frameworks, Morrison attempts to convey or transmit horror, to allow the reader to experience horror, through the performative "breakdown" or "breakage of words."

In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman discusses the resistance of the Holocaust to intelligibility. Any attempt to explain it can only result in reduction. For Felman, it is the "breakage of words" that *acts* (39). When language breaks down, when gaps are introduced, when comprehension is problematized, language begins to act, to enact, to perform, rather than report. Following Felman, one may propose that the "breakage of words" of Beloved's monologue functions performatively to enact and communicate horror without attempting to explain it or reduce it. The textual spaces, the gaps, the play of perspective and voice are all strategies that Morrison employs to fulfill her "single gravest responsibility": "not to lie" ("Site of Memory" 113). To try and speak the horror of infanticide and holocaust, to contain overwhelming emotions and experiences in a structured narrative, would be to betray the past. Paradoxically, Morrison can only speak the truth by not speaking it, and the trauma can only be remembered and mourned through the reader's involvement and witnessing.

What *Beloved* demands is the reader's active participation in the process of constructing meaning and memory. Morrison is explicit concerning this narrative strategy and comments in several different interviews and articles about her partnership with the reader. She observes

addressing ambiguities in her texts, "These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. This is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness" ("Unspeakable" 29). In *Beloved*, the reader's participation is pivotal in as much as the reader's piecing together of the textual fragments amounts to the piecing together of a damaged past, functions as a way to "evolve a subjective language with which to attach different meanings to slavery outside the ways in which it has become fixed in historiography and myth" (Keenan 55).

Ultimately, what *Beloved* demands is that the reader, like Ella, "listen for the holes" (92), or, as Dori Laub puts it, the listener to trauma "must listen to and hear the silence, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within speech" (58). This listening for the holes, listening to silence, is an act of "creative listening," one that allows a story to emerge that the teller cannot know in the process of telling. And the listener, by virtue of the listening, becomes implicated in the event: "By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (Laub 57). The reader's active participation in the construction of *Beloved* functions as a witnessing to the historical trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage and, to the extent that *Beloved's* "breakage of words" functions as performative testimony, moves the reader to feel the "bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread, and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (Laub 58), one can say in Caruth's terms that the "falling" or "departure" of the text, its impossibility of telling, *impacts* on the reader—that the "ghost of reference" returns in the very disarticulation of the text itself. In the absence of knowing, one is moved by an epitaph that haunts.

PASSING ON

The ghost therefore presents an impossible task—to attempt to negotiate an unstable past and to speak what cannot be spoken fully. This dilemma is most forcefully imposed by the radical ambiguity of Morrison's conclusion—her thrice repeated insistence that the story of *Beloved* was and is "not a story to pass on" (274–75)—that suggests simultaneously that the story is one that should not be bypassed and

that the story is one that should not be communicated. The paradox of speaking the unspeakable remains unresolved and doing justice to the dead, in the sense of redressing past injuries, impossible. What can be done with the aporetic conclusion of a story not to pass on, of a story that is too painful to remember but must be remembered to prevent it from being repeated? Morrison's answer is a "creative listening" and imaginative revisioning that listens to the silences of traumatic history and, rather than trying to fill them in, appreciates the silences as silences.

To move through *Beloved* is to undergo the ordeal of undecidability. Morrison's ghost *Beloved* gestures toward these gaps and *Beloved's* story is a "laying along side" of a different story against the historical record. The injustices done to the dead can never be redressed. However, justice can be done to their memories by remembering their stories in order to open a different future, an always yet-to-come future of justice. And this necessary remembrance is not just the unearthing of facts to fill in gaps in the historical record. Rather, it is an interrogation of the record itself, the constant reminder that one story assumes prominence at the expense of others and that what is necessary to recover these other, forgotten stories is the act of imagining. Truth, Morrison tells us, differs from facts. And justice, Derrida notes, is different from law—and the gap between each is the space in which the ghost returns to open up the possibility of a future-to-come different from what one can imagine in the present.¹⁰

Although Morrison writes that "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water and what is down there," the last word of the text, "*Beloved*," belies this forgetting for the tombstone of the "crawling already?" baby and its overdetermined epitaph remain. To learn to live with ghosts is neither to reject the past, nor to let it overwhelm the present. Rather to live with ghosts is "to be haunted in the name of a will to heal," which means to "allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really" (Gordon 57). And this imagining cannot be done alone. In *Beloved*, it is the community that rallies to expel *Beloved*, and Paul D who returns Sethe to herself, thus opening for her a chance for a future. The last word of the text, which circles back around to the title and the beginning, reminds one that *Beloved* belongs to each of us individually

and all of us together. *Beloved* demands to be read as an epitaph. The starkness of the title and the unspeakable incommensurability of “ten minutes for seven letters” is crushing. The ethical imperative that it sets forth is for one to recognize the immensity and terrifying reality of loss. *Beloved* structures an encounter with lostness and introduces the necessity of mourning the lost as lost so as to open the possibility of a different future. Finally, what Sethe and Denver learn to do, at the end of it all, is to live. And it is a ghost that teaches them how.

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NOTES

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1. Scuggs suggests that Sethe’s fornication with the stonecutter is not just payment but an act of penance (189), in which case, one may add “guilt” to the list of essential terms manifest in the encounter.

2. However, although Sethe clearly has not forgotten or repressed the past, she also has not “worked through” the trauma of the loss of her baby girl. Caruth’s description of trauma survivors as not possessing but “possessed” (Introduction 5) by an event or image is clearly applicable to Sethe who undergoes the “literal return of the event” against her will. Sethe does not remember, but “rememories,” relives or reexperiences as flashbacks. For her, “rememory” entails “being there,” returning to the site of trauma. I will argue that this phenomenon of rememory, as *distinct from remembrance*, is connected to a failure of mourning and “working through.”

3. Wyatt writes that, “The novel withholds judgment on Sethe’s act and persuades the reader to do the same” (476). Henderson brings up the question of Sethe’s accountability, but concludes that Morrison, within the text, “neither condemns nor condones,” but “delivers” her protagonist (82), delivers in the sense of redemption. Morrison herself comments in a 1988 interview with Marsha Darling that “I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn’t and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt that the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed” (“In the Realm” 248). However, *Beloved*’s judgment, one that locks Sethe into a “cycle of impossible atonement and expiation” (Keenan 72) and ultimately necessitates her exorcism from the text, clearly is not a verdict Morrison supports.

4. Here one should recall Morrison’s comment in “The Site of Memory” that she journeys to a site of trauma to “see what remains were left behind” (112), to reconstruct what remains unthought or untold through the imagining stimulated by traces. The remains themselves cannot be spoken, but openness to the trace as absence yields the possibility of telling a new story.

5. Derrida writes,

Memory stays with traces, in order to "preserve" them, but traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come—come from the future, from the to come. Resurrection, which is always the formal element of "truth," a recurrent difference between a present and its presence, does not resuscitate a past which had been present; it engages a future.

(*Memoires* 58)

In this sense, "memory projects itself toward the future, and it constitutes the presence of the present" (*Memoires* 57). At this point in the text, Derrida also quotes Paul de Man on "this trace of the future as the power of memory." De Man writes, in his reading of Poulet reading Proust, "The power of memory does not reside in its capacity to resurrect a situation or a feeling that actually existed, but is a constitutive act of the mind bound to its own present and oriented toward the future of its elaboration" (*Memoires* 59).

6. As Morgenstern observes, "much of the criticism on *Beloved* celebrates the text as it retells its story as a story of cure" (122, n28).

7. Jessee observes that what slavery and the Middle Passage disrupted were West African conceptions of time and death in which "present" time "encompasses much of the immediate past, including several generations of ancestors" (199). According to Jessee, *Beloved* is a "forgotten ancestor" (200) who returns to "initiate the collective sharing of memory" (208), which Jessee figures as a process of healing.

8. The absence of linear plot development has also been associated with Morrison's incorporation of aspects of African American oral traditions as well as with African conceptions of time. See Christol, Gorn, Jessee, Sale, and Traoré.

9. Bouson writes concerning this point that, "Deliberately using a fragmented and repetitive narrative structure to convey the disrupted, obsessive world of the trauma victim, Morrison circles around and around the shameful secrets that haunt her characters" (136).

10. Derrida observes the difference between law and justice in "Force of Law."

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