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Poe, Faulkner, and Toni Morrison’s
Beloved

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**“[Breaking] the back of words’: Dimensions of Gothic Unspeakability in
Poe, Faulkner, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”**

An Honors Senior Thesis

By Elizabeth Kirsch

The American Gothic is usually conceptualized as a dark and troubling literary undercurrent which undermines the rational Enlightenment discourse that surrounds the triumphant narrative of American national progress. In other words, what is presented as the proud history of the independent American republic is made problematic by emerging traces of its political counter-narrative; the Gothic appears as an insistent return of disturbing anxieties, troubling perversions, or guilty memories hidden in the national psyche. Gothic tendencies frequently signal the haunting presence of the past in the form of things returning that should be dead or gone; this return of a repressed past embodies the Freudian “uncanny,” often “the paradoxical realm between the living and the dead”(Dolar 6). In literature, Gothic characteristics are often linked to cultural anxieties that undermine the dominant American Dream narrative, such as “the intrusion of slavery”(Goddu 10). The return of such repressed histories of violence or oppression complicates the Enlightenment narrative of Americans as a moral and rational people. As Eric Savoy notes, Gothic devices “express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over [...] the sunny American republic” (“Rise” 168). The tendency toward a historically attractive national narrative is ruptured by the suggestive appearances of this other Gothic history, which deals with those truths or realities that have been repressed—that may be inaccessible to the conscious mind but are perpetually surfacing. The realities that emerge in Gothic texts are therefore the ones that no one wants to talk about—the things that reveal intense anxiety about the instability of ideology; that is, the fragility of human strategies of understanding and navigating the world.

The Gothic is somewhat ambiguous in that it is not a clearly defined “genre” of literature; it can rather be seen as a tendency (Savoy “Tenant” 6). Teresa Goddu observes that “a definition of the American gothic depends less on the particular set of conventions it establishes than on those it disrupts”(4); a common effect of the American Gothic is that it disrupts notions of

identity and “unsettles the nation’s cultural identity”(Goddu 10). What Goddu suggests is that the Gothic is thus better recognized through its psychological and historical disruptions of the individual and national narratives than by any of its particular conventions. However, there are some significant and recognizable figures and tropes that have historically characterized the Gothic tendency: haunted castles and spaces, the Gothic double, the return of the repressed, and the “uncanny.” In addition the Gothic manifests itself literarily not only through particular themes and images, but also through the *specific* focus of this project—the notion of the “unspeakable” and the limits of language in representing reality. In such cases the Gothic may manifest as a kind of obsessive return or gesture towards something that is never ultimately or conclusively articulated, a recurrence that makes both the attempt at articulation and the futility of that attempt all the more haunting. In these configurations, the Gothic emerges as the literary domain of repressed psychological and cultural uneasiness, whose anxiety is exposed through disruptions in the language of a text. The unspeakable surfaces in those moments at which language breaks down—when human strategies of representation fail to encompass what they set out to communicate, indicating the (re)emergence of broader thematic and cultural anxieties. Goddu notes that “the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity”(10). The fragility of these foundations is revealed through the instability of modes of representation themselves, signaled by what Goddu terms “narrative incoherence,” and language reveals itself to be an especially unstable medium; the Gothic history, which critically threatens modes of representation, irrupts stylistically into Gothic texts.

The unspeakable, or inexpressible, is thus a characteristic thematic and stylistic concern of American Gothic literature that demonstrates the inadequacy of language to contain certain

truths and further suggests the instability of national and psychopolitical ideology. Typically, inexpressibility occurs when the text draws attention to an uncanny absence of explication or signification, or explanation that seems beyond human access—when the text gestures towards that which cannot be stated, described, defined, articulated, or located. The inexpressible can be seen as the refusal or inability to definitively describe or pinpoint, as the admission that something resists articulation or definition, as the grammatical manifestation of the failures of language, and as the implication that some things, particularly fears and anxieties, lie outside of the realm of linguistic expression. In describing the Gothic, Eric Savoy invokes the Lacanian Real, “the [...] things [...] beyond representation that [...] demand our attention, that compel us to explanatory language but resist the strategies of that language” (“Rise” 169). The Real, in other words, is the domain of those troubling realities that repeatedly surface, “compel[ling] us to” explain them, but that refuse to be contained by that medium of semantic explanation. Savoy further suggests that a main aspect of the Gothic is “the fragmentation of linguistic accountability” (“Face” 11) in trying to explicate and identify the Real—the falling apart of language as it attempts to locate and explain those things that resist articulation. If, as Savoy suggests, the Gothic represents an encounter or preoccupation with the Lacanian Real, which is by definition outside of the linguistic realm, then the central preoccupations of Gothic texts are registered, and paradoxically represented, through the insufficiency of language to contain certain realities, and the haunting silences that embody that insufficiency.

In keeping with Savoy’s notion of the American Gothic as the site of historical and psychological anxieties, the Gothic unspeakable emerges in the form of linguistic disruptions that signal what we might call identity trauma; that is, those moments when the provisionality of the individual or national self threatens to reveal itself. Fundamental to the Gothic is the uncanny conflation of the self and the Other, signaled thematically and through disruptions in

syntax; this notion of the uncanny “is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety”(Dolar 6). According to Dolar, the Gothic deals with those moments in which the self, or interior, threatens to converge with the Other, or exterior, inciting thematic and grammatical distress. This convergence is particularly threatening to the notions of selfhood that emerged from the Enlightenment: Dolar notes that while “Freud speaks about a ‘universal’ of human experience when he speaks of the uncanny, [...] his own examples tacitly point to its location in a specific historical conjuncture [:] the Enlightenment”(7). The uncanniness of self/Other merging, then, is particular to post-Enlightenment rational selfhood predicated on classification and distinction. If the self is defined by its oppositional relation to the Other (that the self is, by definition, *not* the Other), then the conflation of Otherness with selfhood represents a profound threat to post-Enlightenment identity.

In what follows, I offer a three-part discussion of the evolution of the nature and function of unspeakability. I first introduce Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839) as an example of grammatical irruptions of the uncanny into the individual psyche; in Poe’s tales, grammatical excess signals an insufficiency of certainty that undermines the notion of Enlightenment selfhood and the autonomous American subject. I then expand my reading of unspeakability through an examination of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in which the domain of linguistic failure represents not only the threat to individual identity but the larger destabilization of national identity posed by the repressed but never vanquished legacy of slavery and racism. My study concludes with an extended reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), in which she reconfigures notions of the unspeakable in ways that both register the suppression of African American history and selfhood and propose alternative modes of signification that transcend our racist national history, and the particular model of selfhood implicated therein.

In Gothic texts, linguistic insufficiency is often signaled by emphatic language that strains towards a meaning it never achieves; in Poe's "William Wilson," our narrator finds himself relentlessly pursued by another young man who appears to be identical to himself in appearance, name, and biography. Rhetorical indications of the narrator's inability to articulate certain realities occur throughout the story when he experiences confusion about where he ends and "William Wilson" begins; that is, in moments in which the self is revealed to be only insufficiently distinct from the Other, thus undermining the notion of a unique and known self defined in opposition to its Other. In "William Wilson," grammatical indicators such as repetition, italics, and questions, as well as the narrator's direct acknowledgement of the limitations of language, appear in moments when the uniqueness, controllability, and familiarity of the narrator's selfhood is critically threatened—in the moments where the narrator encounters the Other, and the Other is the self. In the following scene, the narrator watches William Wilson sleep; his confrontation with the Otherness of his identity is manifested through disruptions in his syntax that signal his obsessive return to the horror of this experience, and his inability to articulate its source:

I looked;--and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror. Gasping for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these—*these* the lineaments of William Wilson? [...] What *was* there about them to confound me in this manner? I gazed;--while my brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts. Not thus he appeared—assuredly not *thus*—in the vivacity of his waking hours (224).

The italics, questions, and repetition convey emphasis on the sight (of the sleeping man) and sensation (of the narrator upon seeing this) that are described as impossible to describe—placing emphasis, paradoxically, on something that is not fully identified. These devices further embody in the text a kind of straining towards meaning that is never accomplished—an attempt to contain or fix something that resists semantic containment. At this moment, William Wilson's likeness to

the narrator is more striking than before. The failed articulation occurs when, thematically, the narrator is most unsettled by the similarity between William Wilson and himself. His difficulty in defining his thoughts arises from the unsettling truth towards which they gesture—that the narrator is not a unique individual, and that the self and the Other coincide. Because the self is conventionally understood as stable, a rational and individual identity separate from other identities, the sameness of the narrator and his nemesis undermines the very notion of an individually controlled and unique self.

Poe's tale is therefore twice Gothic: first, in the failure of language to express anxiety about the troubling convergence of self and Other; and second, in the implication that selfhood may not be stable, familiar, and unique—may not, in fact, be distinct from Otherness. The narrator directly refers to the limits of language in expressing this realization when he looks at William Wilson and for an instant believes he looks into a mirror, such is the likeness of William Wilson to himself. The narrator asks, “what human language can adequately portray *that* astonishment, *that* horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view?”(231). The italics and repetition again accentuate the narrator's inability to define his reaction to the image before him, horror enhanced by his direct admission that no “human language” exists to describe his horror; he strains towards explication that is not achieved and that he knows cannot be achieved. These Gothic gaps in explication signal the narrator's inability to locate the self (*his* self) without reference to what it is not—and his anxiety at the looming possibility that the “self” exists only in contradistinction to an Other. Poe's work thus instructs us to read syntactical disruptions as registers of traumatized identity as it stages an encounter with the Other and represents the individual psychological anxiety that can emerge when such an encounter blurs the line between selfhood and Otherness.

“William Wilson,” then, represents a self/Other encounter that reinforces the individual need for an Other against which to define itself; other critics have observed that this same logic, translated to a national scale, operates to define and structure the encounters between White and Black Americans in the 19th century. In such a reading, the enforced divisions between selfhood and Otherness are fundamental to the construction of national identity; the national American being needs the Black Other to be opposite, to be lower, to be less than human, in order for the White American being to be defined against it. As Toni Morrison notes in “Romancing the Shadow,”

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny (*Playing* 52).

American constructions of Blackness, therefore, served as the backdrop against which White national identity could be articulated, and this “Africanist presence informs [...] the texture of American literature” (*Playing* 46). In American literature, then, haunted by the Blackness that permeates its history, the identity of the White self is predicated on the existence of the Black Other. The psychology of the individual uncanny represented in “William Wilson,” or the fear and trauma that occurs when selfhood conflates with Otherness, thus operates, writ large, as the national uncanny of American slavery.

Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* dramatizes this national anxiety about American identity in a compelling narrative of a post-bellum history that refuses to be severed from the presence of slavery, both thematically and grammatically. The novel exists as one of the most exhaustive attempts to represent the inescapability of American racism through a linguistically fractured narrative. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin Compson seeks to navigate the post-bellum South and to understand the collective and inherited guilt that remains inherent in Southern and American identity. Quentin becomes fascinated by the history of Thomas Sutpen, an acquaintance of his

grandfather's, who appeared out of nowhere in Jefferson, Mississippi in 1833 with several slaves, and quickly established wealth and standing. As Quentin hears Sutpen's story from his father and from Sutpen's living sister-in-law, he recognizes his complicity in this history, and confronts its implications—that the past lives on in the present and that the Southern and American being are inextricably linked to slavery.

If Poe's Gothicism allows us to see the fissures in the stability and independence of individual Enlightenment selfhood, and to recognize the fragmentation of language as it attempts to voice the distressing recognition of those fissures, Faulkner's illustrates the insufficiency of language to contain the overwhelming national and regional anxiety over American slavery, and the crumbling of autonomy in the face of an unbreakable link to a guilty history. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* exhibits a semantic excess that creates a simultaneity of past and present, and thus gestures towards the troubling permanence of history and the inability of even the individual self (Quentin) to exist separate from it; the grammatical manifestations of inexpressibility in Faulkner's novel are connected to regional and national guilt over the immorality of slavery, and anxiety about his characters' inability to escape this history. In the novel, Faulkner uses a variety of rhetorical devices to create a simultaneous excess and insufficiency of language—an excess of words that accentuates an inability to contain what language attempts to express, and thereby signals the broader instability of a singular national story to convey the 'truth' of a history. Critics point to Faulkner's grammatical devices: the logic of negation, "which define[s] what is by what is not" (Bunselmeyer 425), appositives, double modifiers, comparisons, and or-clauses as the devices characteristic of Faulkner's linguistic excess (Bunselmeyer 424). Zoellner notes "delayed modification" (488) and "Faulkner's habit of piling 'which' clauses one on the other" (497) as other rhetorical devices that contribute to what is commonly seen as Faulkner's convoluted prose. The multiplicity of clauses join events, people, and time periods together—the

causal and the dependent blend and everything exists at once; the novel's abundance of language undermines traditional ways of processing, categorizing, and understanding pieces of information, and works to make each clause's meaning relational to that of another.

Grammatically, nothing exists independently, mirroring the thematic inability of characters to exist independently from the guilty history that precedes them, and the inability of national selfhood to exist without its referent—the Otherness of slavery.

The sheer number of clauses culminates in a lack of definitive detail which suggests that some parts of human experience cannot be contained in language no matter how these sentences strain to express it—that the grammatically manifested inexpressibility is precisely the point (not the chaotic excess of details it comprises), and one which embodies a regional and national guilt of a people forever implicated in and connected to the violent subjugation of the Other. Just as Poe's text uses linguistic disruptions to illustrate the trauma of individual self/Other conflation, the grammatical instability of Faulkner's narrative represents the collective anxiety that is national selfhood's predication on the history of the Other. Bunselmeyer observes that “the heavy embedding reaches the limits of what the mind can contain”(430). Reading Faulkner is indeed a stressful experience—a reader cannot separate pieces of information when clauses build up and seem to exist simultaneously. The clustering of adjectives and clauses cause everything to exist at once, undermining traditional ways of processing and understanding information. Clauses and sentences “have no individual existence, for each depends for meaning upon its relationship to what comes before and after”(Bunselmeyer, 428). The sum of experiences, people, places, actions, and histories represented in a single sentence defy efforts to organize or separate them, illustrating an overwhelming concurrence of actors, times, and locations; grammatical meaning is therefore relational rather than independent, and reflects the dependence

of White identity itself (American, Southern, and individual) on the troubling history of American slavery.

Specifically, the grammatical overlapping of history and present time creates the impression that the past permeates the present, and reflects the thematic concern that history is inescapable; for a region culturally implicated in the immoral history of slavery, the notion that one is never free or separate from one's history is psychologically unpalatable. In addition to the general semantic excess and simultaneity of experience, the persistence of this grammatical overflow is reinforced through time shifts that overlap the past and the present, evoking the terrifying notion, especially for a region mentally and emotionally trying to separate itself from the immorality of slavery, that the past pervades the present time—that the present is, in fact, forever defined by its past. In what Zoellner refers to as “time-alteration”(488), multiple time periods are contained within one sentence or paragraph that switches back and forth between them, and often concludes in a different time than when it was begun. The following sentence begins with Quentin at home with his father in 1909 and concludes with Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson in 1833, but is more complex even than that; it switches back and forth between time periods three times: from 1909 to 1833, back to 1909, and back to 1833:

It was a day of listening too—the listening, the hearing in 1909 even yet mostly that which he already knew since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833 (and, on Sundays, heard even one of the original three bells in the same steeple where descendants of the same pigeons strutted and crooned or wheeled in short courses resembling soft fluid paint-smears on the soft summer sky); a Sunday morning in June with the bells ringing peaceful and peremptory and a little cacophonous[...] when the other men sitting with their feet on the railing of the Holston House gallery looked up, and there a stranger was (23).

The combination of time shifts and delayed modification (Zoellner 488) creates a simultaneous existence of past and present; facilitated by a plethora of clauses and punctuation, this sentence suggests that the past is enmeshed in the present time. The time periods are embedded within one

another, preventing one from taking priority. The past's grammatical embeddedness within the present indicates a larger inexpressible anxiety for Faulkner's characters. Because "The Sunday mornings of 1909 coalesce inextricably with those of 1833"(Zoellner 489), a past that appears to be over is not so; it lives on in the very grammar of the present time. Quentin "breathe[s] the same air" as Sutpen did so many years ago; despite the fact that Sutpen is dead, he and Quentin are represented as of the same essence. The Gothic is a realm "where the past constantly inhabits the present"("Rise" 167)—for Faulkner this inhabitation occurs in the actual structure of the sentences. The syntactical technique mirrors the lack of chronological order within the story; we get the sense that all the characters, dead or alive, exist simultaneously—that the dead and seemingly gone actually permeate the lives of characters in the present.

Faulkner's rhetorical excess carries with it the implication that the way we understand ourselves must be entwined with our past; the grammatical existence of past and present together suggest the inability of an individual, region, or nation to escape a history, no matter how troubling. If Faulkner's style embodies the troubling permanence of the past, its consequences are that the individual can never separate himself from his history; the evils of slavery can never be eradicated—they are forever a part of Quentin, the South, and the nation. If "moral evil is a living, inherited continuum"(Zoellner 492) in *Absalom, Absalom!*, then the American individual is forever implicated in the immoral mess of slavery. The grammatical embedding of the past within the present implicates the inability of an individual, a region, or a nation to escape the past; this cultural anxiety echoes the syntactically manifested individual identity trauma in "William Wilson" in its representation of the reliance of American selfhood on the presence of the Other. The self, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, cannot be autonomous because it is tied to the past; Faulkner's unspeakable, like Poe's, threatens the notion of the autonomous individual. *Absalom, Absalom!*, following Poe's work, sets up identity and slavery as fundamental concerns of the

Gothic (and fundamentally entwined concerns), and questions the ability of human strategies of representation to cope with the guilt, trauma, and anxieties that surface as a result of those concerns.

Faulkner's novel, however, while an exploration of the inescapability of American racism, is ultimately another depiction of the White psyche. We cannot expect Faulkner to transcend his own Whiteness, and because of that, his novel remains unable to conceive of the true history of the Other from the perspective of that Other. One of the most problematic figures of the text is the final descendent of the Sutpen line, the mentally handicapped and racially mixed Jim Bond, whose inarticulate wailing in the surrounding forest haunts the White characters at the conclusion of the novel and refuses to subside. Bond's cry remains inaccessible to Faulkner, to his White characters, and to his readers; this inaccessibility suggests both Faulkner's personal entrenchment in the racial consequences of his own Whiteness, and the intensity of the emotional and visceral dimensions of Bond's howling, which embodies the story of the Other—a story that cannot be told or comprehended from a White perspective, but that also cannot be ignored. It is Morrison who undertakes the telling of *that* story in *Beloved*, and who seeks to articulate the uniquely traumatic narrative of the slave.

Whereas Poe's and Faulkner's works emphasize linguistic disruptions as registers of social, political, and psychological disturbance, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, arguably the most powerful Gothic novel of the 20th century, appropriates the trope of unspeakability in order to depict the traumatic African American subjectivity that is the unique product of the horror of American slavery. *Beloved* both responds to and revises Faulkner's depiction of the tragic afterlife of slavery by expanding exponentially the notion of unspeakability; in addition to the general failure of language to represent psychological and historical trauma, as we've seen in earlier models, *Beloved* demands that we re-examine dominant linguistic modes as troubling

mediums of representation for expressing the transcendently horrific realities of slavery. As Abdellatif Khayati summarizes, “to give the past a different reading, to represent Black American experience not simply as it has been measured by dominant norms [...] involves a re-invention of tradition and of dominant language tropes” (Khayati 313). For Morrison, the slave experience creates a unique domain of historical unspeakability that produces a particular mode of subjectivity; in her vision, that historical mode is not only registered through representations of silencing, but also demands new modes of expression. While Morrison’s project emerges from within Savoy’s, Poe’s, and Faulkner’s existing conceptual models of unspeakability as a grammatical manifestation of something threatening to surface, her novel also produces new modes of communication and connection that transcend linguistic logic, as it insists thematically that these existing models are insufficient to convey the altered personhood resulting from American slavery.

Morrison’s *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a woman who killed her child in order to prevent its being taken back into slavery. In 1856, a pregnant Garner escaped with her husband, his parents, and their four children; they took refuge in the home of a free relative (Gordon 154). The family was discovered, and when the arresting party reached Garner, they found “two profusely bleeding children, a badly bruised infant, and the almost lifeless girl who passed on minutes later. Sometime during the assault on the house, Margaret Garner tried to kill her children”(155). There are various accounts of exactly what happened and what was said; varying reports have Margaret expressing insistence upon killing her children rather than letting them be re-enslaved, as well as asking her mother-in-law for help killing the children (Weisenburger 74). Garner, however, was not tried for murder. Instead, the trial focused on whether the Garners were fugitive slaves and should thus be returned to their owner

(her status as property was maintained). The Garners were declared to legally be slaves and were ordered back into slavery (Gordon 155).

Margaret Garner was not allowed to tell us her story, so in telling a version of it, Morrison tells us the story that has been silenced—the story of those who cannot speak or of those whose voices are not remembered. As Morrison poignantly suggests,

There is no place, here, where I can go or where you can go, and think about or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves. [...] There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby, there is no three-hundred-foot tower, there is no small bench by the road, there is not even a tree scored and initialed, that I can visit, or you can visit. (Morrison in Wiesenburger 264)

Beloved thus serves as an emblem to an actual history that *has not* been told or commemorated. As Rody observes, “*Beloved* is manifestly about the filling in of historical gaps”(93). Morrison’s tale therefore functions thematically as an expression of the voices of the enslaved and oppressed, whose stories have been silenced or, as in the case of Faulkner’s Jim Bond, rendered as illegible, subordinated the primacy of the White experience. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents us with the disruptive and disrupted voice of that incomprehensible Other—*Beloved* is the story contained in Jim Bond’s wrenching howls, the story unheard in Margaret Garner’s desperate killing of her own children, the silenced story of the Other. In American literary history, this story has been taken up primarily to foreground the dominant (White) racial self. The invocation of this particular Otherness, says Morrison, “deployed as rawness and savagery, [...] provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (*Playing* 44). While Faulkner’s novel, then, uses unspeakability largely to show the effects of slavery on the White Southern/American conscience, Morrison *tells* that story that is embodied in Jim Bond’s inarticulate howling—the Other, “Black” side of the story that presents an alternative mode of personhood which requires altered ways of viewing identity and experience, and demands new kinds of language to accommodate its trauma.

In representing the way that White culture has failed to allow the articulation of the Black experience, Morrison extends earlier models of linguistic failure with references to the limitations of conventional discourse and the inclusion of alternative modes of communication; these moments enforce the demand for new modes of expression in conveying the slave experience. For Morrison, language is *especially* limited for the people excluded from vocal participation in it (and in the economic, social, and political power it enables and represents). The novel repeatedly refers to the direct exclusion of Black voices from conventional discourse, and asserts the extent to which their Otherness is predicated on their exclusion and alienation from expressive modes of power. On multiple occasions, slaves are literally not permitted to speak in the presence of their White slavemasters, and are thus directly excluded from participation in conventional forms of expression. In this way, the novel suggests that it is not only language as a whole that is insufficient to communicate the horrors of slavery, but that it is also this particular language (standard English) and that there is something about the slave experience that makes it impossible to express in the language of the people that perpetrated it—in the language of the oppressor. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the character of schoolteacher, through whom Morrison portrays a language that codifies, categorizes, and pins down in order to “master”(McDermott 81), reduce, and “subjugat[e]”(81) the Other. The novel’s primary example of this “reductive discourse”(Khayati 315) occurs when Sethe overhears schoolteacher talking to his pupils; schoolteacher instructs his students to select a slave, and “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right”(Beloved 228). Morrison’s text presents schoolteacher as a “definer”(Beloved 225), one who “seeks to fix others into inferiority [...] in order to preserve his privilege”(Khayati 320). In asking his students to divide the slave into “human” and “animal” features, his “divisive logic and pseudo-empirical scientism is an example of what Morrison considers to be the language of control”(320);

Morrison emphasizes the racism inherent in this mode of discourse and its source in Enlightenment ideology of classification in order to highlight its dehumanizing and alienating effects, and to foreground the slave's necessity for alternative modes of expression. She thus confronts the limitations of what a contemporary White audience might accept as "traditional" and universal notions of personhood and language. Her text looks to alternative modes of expression that accompany the recognition that the dominant forms of narrative language have been imperialistic and exclusionary. Black characters begin to express themselves in alternative ways, employing images, nonverbal communication and body language, and communication through sound. These moments are significant because they demonstrate that slave experience requires new modes of expression in order to make itself understood.

Morrison's thematic references to the inadequacy of dominant linguistic tropes emphasize that slavery is a historically particular experience that eludes expression in the language of the oppressor; her characters repeatedly demonstrate that conventional discourse is inadequate to their history and experience. Especially in Paul D's memories of the plantation in Georgia, Black voices are intentionally excluded from conventional forms of expression, emphasizing the active relationship between linguistic and material authority. The shout of the "Hi Man"(127) is "the first sound, other than 'Yes, sir,' a Black man was allowed to speak each morning"(127). Literally prohibited from speaking except in situations controlled by White masters, Black characters are excluded from language in the most direct sense. White characters in the novel actively suppress Black speech, which is again clear in Paul D's explanation of Schoolteacher's view of the Sweet Home men, which depicts Black speech as subhuman:

they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke (147-8).

In the eyes of White slavemasters such as schoolteacher, Black characters are domesticated work animals, excluded from “the human race” and the White language that “responsible humans” speak. Despite the blatant racism of schoolteacher’s perspective, the passage does illuminate the novel’s distinction between conventional expression and the expression of these characters. This is not, of course, because Black characters are animals incapable of intelligent speech, but because the silencing of Black voices prevents those voices from gaining expression through dominant language forms and because Black experience resists containment in a language that does not allow for its validity. This resistance is expressed as and realized through syntactic disruption.

Part of Morrison’s project echoes the earlier Gothic discourse of linguistic limitations in her use of grammatical irruptions such as insistent questions, repetition, disordered listing, and strained grammatical emphasis through italics; each of these devices suggests the indescribable nature of slavery to her and represents the characters’ desperate attempts but ultimate inability to articulate certain traumatic experiences. When Stamp Paid asks Paul D if he ran away because of the infanticide or because of Beloved’s physical presence in the house, Paul D’s response hints at the inexpressibly horrific experiences of slave life:

A shudder ran through Paul D [...] He didn’t know if it was bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters, fired feet, laughing dead men, hissing grass, rain, apple blossoms, neck jewelry, Judy in the slaughterhouse, Halle in the butter, ghost-White stairs, chokecherry trees, cameo pins, aspens, Paul A’s face, sausage or the loss of a red, red heart. ‘Tell me something, Stamp.’ Paul D’s eyes were rheumy. ‘[...] How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?’ ‘All he can,’ said Stamp Paid. ‘All he can.’ ‘Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?’ (277).

Here, the personal trauma of slavery registers as an overwhelming disruption in the grammar of the text. These images refer to Paul D’s memories of humiliation, pain, and loss. Echoing Faulkner’s mode here, the chaotic listing of these images and objects associated with his experiences as a slave demonstrates the insufficiency of standard language to contain the sum of

his unspeakably horrific experience; these haunting flashes of Paul D's memory refuse to be pushed down and instead accumulate, in no hierarchical order, suggesting that the experiences of slavery resist recognizable order or reason. Paul D's desperately repeated question—"Why?"—suggests his incapacity to comprehend, process, or articulate the things he has experienced, and also the extremes of racism that condemned him to these experiences. These kinds of grammatical disruptions echo Poe's and Faulkner's in their implications of anxieties that cannot be directly voiced, or that the author or character resists voicing in order to represent the extremity of these traumas to the reader.

In another passage, Morrison uses similar grammatical interruptions to signal Stamp's inability to articulate, parallel to the suffering of those in slavery, his realization about the troubling capacities of (White) humankind. These linguistic disruptions surface when Stamp Paid finds an object symbolic of White racism and the horrors of life as a Black person; he finds

a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp[...]On his way home, he stopped, short of breath and dizzy[...]he turned to look back down the road he was traveling and said, [...] 'What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?'(212-3).

The piece of scalp still attached to the ribbon makes clear that something violent happened to its wearer; what Stamp finds is a tangible relic of slavery and White cruelty. The horror of what he sees is manifested in his strained emphasis and the repetition of his question. The text thus uses the same earlier grammatical indicators of inexpressibility (repetition, italics, and questions) to demonstrate Stamp's inability to articulate the monstrosity of White behavior and the resulting horror of the slave experience, as well as to represent the actual inexpressibility of such realms of human cruelty.

Morrison's utilization of familiar modes of linguistic disruption culminates in Sethe's attempt to justify her actions to Beloved; it is here that Morrison begins, even in the use of such earlier models, to demonstrate why these earlier disruptions are insufficient. When Sethe tries to

explain to Beloved (who she believes to be her dead daughter) why she had to kill her, Morrison stages a breakdown of language to emphasize the inexpressibility of such a unique trauma—the insufficiency of language to explain Sethe’s motivation for killing her daughter. When Beloved makes Sethe feel guilty, “Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children[....]none of which made the impression it was supposed to”(284). The consecutive use of verbs such as “talk,” “explain,” and “describe” illustrates the futility of explaining her actions to Beloved. The repetition with difference of these similar verbs (almost synonyms) suggests the inability of any of them to encompass what they try to signify—in other words, the fact that each verb is followed by another of almost the same meaning demonstrates repeated and failed attempts to find one that fits, illustrating the ultimate incapacity of any of them to communicate what Sethe wants. This grammatical construction demands that we acknowledge the inadequacy of language to pin down such unique horror. There is no effective talk, explanation, or description for this situation that can be reduced into a traditional linguistic model. The experience itself reveals the limits of dominant notions of rational subject-hood. Because Sethe kills her daughter (a seemingly incomprehensible and inexcusable act in a traditional “Enlightenment” schema of logic and subjectivity) in order to avoid returning her to the hands of the cruel schoolteacher, it is slavery itself that explodes the notion of unspeakable trauma and demands new modes of understanding personhood and expression.

Morrison repeatedly represents Black experiences as incompatible with conventional modes of discourse in the inability of dominant linguistic tropes to portray the uniquely traumatic experiences of her characters. When Paul D shows Sethe the newspaper article about Sethe’s “murder” of her daughter, wordlessly requesting an explanation, the narrator tells us that “Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words[....]but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn’t any more power than she had to explain”(190). The newspaper article and its

words are limited and unable to encompass Sethe's motivations; she recognizes that these words are insufficient to communicate the instinct and necessity inherent in her actions and indicative of an alternative logic that is inadequate to her reality as a slave. Through Sethe's silence, Morrison emphasizes the trauma unique to Sethe's experience—one that resists being contained or expressed by the language of the people who are doing the enslaving.

Morrison's thematic references to the exclusionary and limited nature of racist discourse suggest its failure to articulate adequately the truths of slavery; in addition, they gesture toward the novel's creation of a variety of alternative expressive modes. *Beloved* moves well beyond the linguistic and grammatical disruptions that appear in Poe and Faulkner; as the novel goes on, these earlier irruptions are revealed to be themselves insufficient to gesture towards the unspoken history represented in Morrison's novel—for Morrison's Black characters, this historically particular trauma of slavery demands a kind of linguistic refiguring that echoes the transformation of subject-hood produced by the unique horrors of slavery. Morrison, however, not content to merely critique the inadequacy of previous literary and historical approaches to represent the Black narrative of slavery, also highlights the creativity and resilience of the Black community under slavery in addressing that silencing. Her novel tells a story not only of fragmentation, loss and suffering, but also of alternative, strength, and community.

Accompanying the recognition of the limitations of dominant modes of expression, Morrison explores alternative modes of communication as less exclusionary mediums of representation, reinforcing the need for new schemas of expression in representing the slave experience. Morrison uses images, body language, sound, and finally, radical linguistic restructuring, to illustrate the necessity of new expressive mediums for her characters that are irreducible to conventional language. First, Morrison uses images to embody a kind of wordless and unlimited expression. When the baby's ghost is inhabiting the house, Paul D walks through a

red pool of light that embodies the despair of the ghost: “walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry[...]Paul D looked at the spot where the grief had soaked him. The red was gone but a kind of weeping clung to the air where it had been”(11). The wording “a kind of” is vague and unspecific because it describes something that defies being pinned down in words. The red light embodies “grief” without saying anything at all—it manifests “a kind of weeping” that “[clings] to the air”; the characters (and the reader) can *see* the weeping manifested in a space. This type of expression is embodied in an image and the feeling it inspires, and seems irreducible to verbal language.

The characters utilize another form of nonverbal communication in body language, which the novel presents as critical to physical survival during slave life, further reinforcing the absolute need for new modes of expression to accommodate American slavery, as well as how these modes allow for slave communication that is otherwise suppressed. This capacity for new forms of communication represents the capacity for alternative modes of personhood that slavery produces. Thinking of the plantation in Georgia, Paul D remembers being physically chained to the other 46 slaves during a flood, where the men were confined to individual cells and were in danger of drowning (130). Communicating only with yanks on their communal chain, they dig themselves out and save themselves from being buried in their cells: “They talked through that chain like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up”(130). In this case, nonverbal body language is crucial to their physical survival on the plantation, accentuating the vital necessity of other modes of communication in explicating and even surviving the slave experience, as well as the resilience of these characters in exploring new modes of expression and being that are consistent with their experiences.

The novel also portrays sound as a medium through which an uncontained, primal and transcendent expression can occur, depicting words as a limiting structure that must be broken

through. After the infanticide, the women gather to see Sethe taken to jail in the cart: “they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all”(179). Possessing no words for a uniquely traumatic scene, the women show solidarity with Sethe through a unified elemental sound. Later on, when the women decide to get together and help save Sethe from Beloved, they once again use wordless sound to show support:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (308).

Words are presented as limiting—as something to be broken through in order to embody experience in a more visceral way. As Khayati notes, “the spiritual power of these women’s ritualistic singing, arising from sound and sensation, lies beyond the meaning that words can ‘pin’ down”(322). The notion of a baptism carries connotations of rebirth and renewal, implicating a kind of cleansing of a limited schema of expression, and a rebirth or refiguring of the nature of expression and experience—a baptism from which the former slaves’ language and experiences re-emerge disencumbered of the racist restrictions imposed upon them.

Morrison’s novel takes the historical and racial dimensions of inexpressible experience to new limits, radically reconfiguring existing models of language and of its relationship to subjectivity, and even the logic of personhood itself, through the ambiguous and quintessentially Gothic figure of Beloved; presented first as the rematerialized figure of Sethe’s dead daughter, but later revealed to be representative of much more than this individual trauma, Beloved is neither dead nor alive, but rather a “spectral embodiment of [...] a history that can never be completely spoken or silenced”(Goddu 154). In an Enlightenment schema of understanding predicated on rationality and empirical categorization, personhood conforms to a kind of rational morality, and refers to unique and independent agents; this logic of subjectivity is disrupted by

the uncanny figure of Beloved, who resists attempts at reason, order, and classification. As Mladen Dolar explains, “traditional thought consisted of the constant effort to draw a clear line between the interior and the exterior. [The uncanny] blurs this line”(6). Beloved occupies this blurred liminal space, “this strange dimension—the paradoxical realm between the living and the dead [...] where the real [...] begins to speak”(Dolar 6). Beloved, as a resident of both interior (in her personal trauma) and exterior, both imagined and real, both dead and alive, both remembered and forgotten, embodies this new and indefinable dimension. Morrison’s novel depicts “the emergence of something that shatters well-known divisions and which cannot be situation within them”(Dolar, 6), and it is this “something” particular to the slave trauma which demands an alternative schema of understanding.

The most extreme reconfiguration of language in the novel, therefore, occurs through the figure of Beloved, and her role as an embodiment of the individual and collective horrors of slavery. Beloved represents a form of traumatized and re-empowered personhood that emerges from that unique horror, and is realized in the imagistic and fragmented language in Beloved’s speech. Beloved’s interior monologues express that there are realms of experience, embodied in herself, that demand expression in new ways. The individual and collective traumas of slavery that she represents supersede the modes of grammatical unspeakability used by Poe and Faulkner; in Morrison’s work, the corruption of individual identity that slavery inflicts gestures toward a new understanding of selfhood and being, and demands new kinds of language to convey them. There is a parallel, therefore, between the content of Beloved’s character (both individual and collective, both dead and alive, etc) and the language used to express it. The semantic experimentation in her stream-of-consciousness-like chapters reflects the new perspective Morrison points to in understanding the self and the history of slavery. Beloved embodies a trauma that is difficult to conceptualize, and exists on both sides of conventional

boundaries such as living/dead, imaginary/real, and individual/collective. The realm of traumatic experience *Beloved* represents dismantles our notions of subjectivity and language and suggests that some experiences are incompatible with traditional Enlightenment notions of being and expression as rational and contained.

Beloved's early communication is image-focused and suggests how the space she occupies cannot be clearly contained or defined; Morrison's use of the visual suggests a mode of personhood that is also not discrete or contained. *Beloved*'s image-based expression is portrayed as more vivid and powerful than conventional semantic form: "Sethe stirred and looked around. First at *Beloved*'s soft new hand on her shoulder, then into her eyes. The longing she saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control"(69). The word "bottomless" conveys a longing that cannot be defined or given a starting or ending point. This is a new kind of expression—it is not contained, and its power lies in the ability of its image to inspire an emotion; just from looking at *Beloved*'s eyes, Sethe is able to see a kind of inarticulate and infinite longing. The novel portrays this longing as irreducible, and previews the irreducibility of *Beloved* herself as a paradoxical embodiment of binaries on which rational subjectivity is usually predicated, such as self/Other, interior/exterior, and history/present.

The "silent" interior monologues of *Beloved*'s thoughts lend new insight to the collective and individual horrors of slavery, and the resulting traumatized personhood embodied in *Beloved*; her unique identity collapses conventional distinctions between individual person/collective memory, living/dead, and real/imaginary. These chapters depict a traumatized subjectivity that forces a new understanding of selfhood—one which demands its own modes of discourse. Morrison thus suggests that, because the logic of conventional Enlightenment personhood (as complete, discrete, rational, and classifiable) is disrupted or obviated when

confronted with the trauma of the slave experience, so must the grammatical logic through which that identity is manifested shift in order to tell this story.

Beloved's chapters display a linguistic experimentation that mirrors thematic disruptions in personhood created by the horrors of slavery. She uses a kind of image-speak that refigures conventional notions of personhood and language in order to communicate the irreducibility of her multi-faceted identity. Beloved's child-like image-speak is not written in a way that makes conventional "sense," although her section, in a way, is ultra-literal. She says things the way she sees them, such as, "she opens the grass"(249). She refigures White men as "men without skin." She seems to have no schema for understanding Whiteness, no experience with White individuals, and thus her description is an image—one that may not make "sense" to a reader. Being "without skin" also carries specific connotations of Whiteness, painting White men as lacking a fundamental human quality. Her repeated image of "a hot thing" again shows a different schema of knowing; the horror of the branding iron is not something for which Beloved has a model of understanding, so she repeats the image defining the item only by its temperature—besides that, it is merely a "thing." Refusing the forcefulness of language that defines, classifies, and controls, Beloved's sections merely point and suggest through the presentation of compelling images.

What Beloved needs to say for herself and the characters she represents resists conventional linguistic form; there is an inherent incompatibility between her images and the conventional semantic models in which items and people are classified, defined, and contained. Beloved's visual and uninhibited speech reflects the new perspective that Morrison advocates for in understanding the self in terms of a less discrete and more fluid, flexible, and communal mode of personhood. This linguistic experimentation "does not restore a sense of the foundational, fixed, and autonomous subject of tradition"(Khayati 315), but instead suggests the possibility of

a less confining schema of subjectivity and expression. Beloved rejects conventional linguistic form as inadequate to encompass the uniquely traumatic experience she represents, as well as the forms of collective personhood that emerges to combat the alienation of that experience; as she says, “how can I say things that are pictures”(248). There seems to be an inherent incompatibility between the “picture” she wants to “say” and the linguistic models available to her. This instinct towards imagery “affords a mode of historical knowledge that cannot be contained within the bounds of oral/aural narration”(McDermott, 84). This section is not written in a recognizable grammatical form, and the word choice does not conform to expectations, putting things in new perspective. Beloved’s strange “speech” here ultimately emphasizes the incomprehensible nature of these experiences to an Enlightenment schema of experience based on rationality, and thus illustrates the possibility of and the necessity for an alternative logic that is applicable to the uniquely horrifying experience of slavery, as well as the creativity and resilience of these characters in enacting that alternative.

In addition to the reliance on non-linguistic structures, Beloved’s discourse displays multiple narratives simultaneously, one personal and one collective, suggesting that Beloved herself represents both collective trauma and the psychological sufferings of the individual slave. Her chapters form a kind of “narrative” that is ambiguous but significant in its conflation of multiple simultaneous stories that merge past and present, and self and community. Beloved’s chapters recount an experience on what sounds like slave ship in the Middle Passage—this experience cannot historically be Beloved’s own, because Sethe’s dead daughter was born in America and was never on a slave ship. So while Sethe, and perhaps, the reader, sees Beloved as the particular ghost of the dead infant, Beloved’s monologues suggest that she embodies much more. In connecting her with a setting symbolic of the slave trade, Morrison presents Beloved as a manifestation of the history of slavery, thereby linking her to a collective trauma in addition to

an individual one. Beloved first tells us, “I am always crouching”(248), suggesting small quarters in which there is a “little hill of dead people”(249) and even a “dead man on my face”(248). These images imply that the living and the dead are in one small area, and that Beloved is pressed up against a dead man. She mentions seeing light “through the cracks,”(248), suggesting a kind of “dungeon” beneath the ship where slaves were kept. This setting is evocative of the poor living conditions in which slaves existed on the Middle Passage, and the likeness is further exemplified when “the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink”(248). These men, presumably the slaves’ White captors, bring the slaves their urine to drink, as well as moldy “sea colored”(249) bread. Finally, Beloved’s repeated observation, “a hot thing,” could be a reference to a kind of hot poker often used to brand slaves during the journey. In placing her in the context of this symbol of the slave trade, Morrison demonstrates that she is emblematic of the history of slavery and thus represents a collective trauma as well as an individual one.

The collective and personal narratives exist simultaneously: the narrative of Beloved on the slave ship and the narrative of Beloved as Sethe’s daughter are conflated, not separate, reinforcing Beloved’s position as a paradoxical figure representing both the individual traumatic subject and the collective slave trauma, and defying efforts to separate individual from collective, past from present, or real from imaginary. The linguistic instability in her chapters, therefore, points to a larger ontological instability of Enlightenment logic of categorization and definition. Morrison represents Beloved as occupying both sides of these individual/community and history/present binaries, and thus as resisting conventional modes of classification. The communal model of subjectivity Beloved represents, then, refuses the distinctions upon which rational subjectivity is premised. The space she occupies, as both an individual and collective subject, is appropriate to relate the slave experience because it bears witness to the dissipation of

the discrete self in the face of a shared history—an inherited history that insists upon a communal subjectivity in order to resist the alienation and division of the slave experience. The inheritors of this history (like Morrison), while never able to fully recreate this past, may imagine it through the seemingly extra-rational collective memory represented in *Beloved*. Rody notes that “Writing that bears witness to an inherited tragedy approaches the past with an interest much more urgent than historical curiosity or even political revisionism”(97). While she is intent upon revising a national history, Morrison, as an inheritor of this tragedy also recognizes that only through this collective consciousness and its awareness of a silenced history can healing occur.

Beloved, as the return of the repressed but living history of slavery that dismantles dominant notions of subjectivity, is a presence that can never fully be contained or ignored. Paul D notes early in the novel, “what if the girl was not a girl but something in disguise?”(149). Paul D sees *Beloved* as something larger and more menacing than the ghost of an individual infant. He tells Stamp, “ ‘First minute I saw her I didn’t want to be nowhere around her [...] She reminds me of something. Something [...] I’m supposed to remember’”(276). *Beloved*, as a physical manifestation of traumatic slave history, functions as a reminder to Paul D of his repressed memories—as an insistence on keeping that collective history alive but just below the surface. Yet she is the story without a “trace,” the one literally “down there” under the water, forgotten because “remembering seemed unwise”(324). *Beloved* is the living history of slavery—more than a ghost, she is a character with physical agency who is both history and present. She is the story no one wants to tell, and in trying to communicate that story of a historically particular traumatized experience, Morrison needs a new discourse that will allow for the model of subjectivity that emerges from that trauma.

Beloved’s conflation of identities illustrates the communal personhood that results from the alienating traumas of slavery; this leads to a fragmentation of the post-Enlightenment rational

self, and illustrates the need for a new kind of subjectivity produced by the slave experience. In the novel, the self undergoes a variety of traumas: it is both fused with other selves, and split from them (resisting our notions of selfhood as discrete, unique, and complete). Morrison suggests that historically American slavery produced the conditions of an alternative selfhood whose survival depended on its ability to flourish outside traditional Enlightenment notions of rational behavior. The slave experience as unveiled by these chapters requires an altered understanding of personhood and existence, because the conventional model is insufficient, intentionally, to explain the self of the slave (and insufficient to explain *Beloved*). Morrison tells a story, then, indicting the forces of Enlightenment discourse that insisted upon the unintelligibility of Jim Bond's howling; she challenges the notion of one "correct" model of personhood, and presents an alternative that must be acknowledged. Personhood in *Beloved* is not discrete, but simultaneously fused with other selves (defying notions of selfhood as discrete and unique). *Beloved* repeatedly suggests that her identity is inextricably linked to Sethe's: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing"(248). The very possibility that one self is "not separate" from another is antithetical to a post-Enlightenment conception of liberal personhood predicated on political and legal autonomy, and reveals that model's reliance on conditions denied to slaves, to their ancestors, and, in some cases to their descendants—in that schema, a self must be a discrete, unique, contained entity. The repeated image of "the hot thing" connects this altered self to the atrocities on the slave ship; this fluid mode of personhood emerges from the need to work against the dehumanization and alienation of slavery. *Beloved* and Sethe's identities are merged (and Denver's, too, later in the chapter), as a way of maintaining connection in the face of a traumatic experience. *Beloved* continues to identify with Sethe's face, saying in this unspoken monologue, "You are my face; I am you. Why did you

leave me who am you?"(256). This passage positions Beloved as a part of Sethe that Sethe left behind, further contributing to the picture of a transformed personhood. The Enlightenment understanding of the rational self is further disrupted in the very action of infanticide. Sethe, judging Paul D, thinks, "Too thick, he said. My love was too thick. What he know about it?"(239). It is clear that slavery produces a form of personhood willing to do certain things that a traditional schema of reason and subjectivity would refuse to recognize. In Sethe's logic, she *had* to kill her daughter; in fact, killing her was saving her—saving her from the worse fate that was slavery. Morrison, in representing Margaret Garner's story, presents literal death as less traumatic than the kind of death of spirit that can result from a life in slavery.

In Morrison's narrative of alternative subjectivity, Beloved represents not a single identity, but a conflation of many. She is at once individual and collective, historical memory and present actor, real and not. This positioning resists Enlightenment logic of personhood and existence, and thus is unspeakable in a discourse that rests upon that schema. In trying to communicate this story of traumatized personhood, Morrison explodes the existing models of discourse to construct an alternative one. In representing both sides of these binaries, Beloved also represents all of these characters; her existence as a collective identity is reinforced in various places throughout the novel. After Beloved's disappearance, the communal nature of her identity is clear:

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as if no one ever walked there. By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there (324).

The fact that Beloved's footprints fit anyone suggests that she is all of them—she is the embodiment of their story, malleable to each individual reality, yet also shared. Beloved, "as a symbolic compression of innumerable forgotten people into one miraculously resurrected

personality”(Rody 104), is illegible to a discourse that rests upon a need to define, categorize, pin down, and contain. The history *Beloved* represents, while it cannot be completely reconstructed, will not lie still, and must be acknowledged. As Goddu summarizes, “Morrison argues that these traces of the nation’s racial history require attention, for the costs of the unspeakable unspoken are greater than the dangers and difficulty of articulation”(159). To Morrison, this story, the story of the “Sixty Million and more” referenced in the novel’s dedication, while it cannot ever fully be spoken, must no longer be kept silent. *Beloved* is that place, then, “where I can go or where you can go, and think about or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves”(Morrison in Wiesenburger 264).

Tracing the development of unspeakability through American Gothic texts allows us to observe the different modes and consequences of the haunting that is ever-present in the American narrative. Rody tells us that “every American house is a haunted house”(100), and this reality is nowhere more apparent than in the instability of Enlightenment epistemology referenced by Poe and Faulkner and insistently exposed by Morrison. Silences in national history, as well as the disrupted language that registers and encases them, must be recognized, *must* be acknowledged, as areas that demand reconsideration of dominant modes of knowing, being, and speaking. Only through “listening” to those haunting silences and their insistence on that reconsideration can a nation plagued by them begin to trace and recover from the difficulties of its own unsettled identity.

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