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In *Beloved* Toni Morrison puts into words three orders of experience that Western cultural narratives usually leave out: childbirth and nursing from a mother’s perspective; the desires of a preverbal infant; and the sufferings of those destroyed by slavery, including the Africans who died on the slave ships. The project of incorporating into a text subjects previously excluded from language causes a breakdown and restructuring of linguistic forms to make room for the articulation of alternative desires, Morrison’s textual practice flouts basic rules of normative discourse.

Through the device of the ghost story, Morrison gives a voice to the preverbal infant killed by a mother desperate to save her child from slavery: the dead baby, Beloved, comes back in the body of a nineteen-year-old, able to articulate infantile feelings that ordinarily remain unspoken. Her desire to regain the maternal closeness of a nursing baby powers a dialogue that fuses pronoun positions and abolishes punctuation, undoing all the marks of separation that usually stabilize language. Beloved also has a collective identity: she represents a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the Middle Passage, the “Sixty Million and more” of the novel’s epigraph. She describes conditions on the slave ships in fragmented images without connective syntax or punctuation, capturing the loss of demarcation and differentiation of those caught in an “oceanic” space between cultural identities, between Africa and an unknown destination (Nimroider 72).

The mother figure, Sethe, defines herself as a maternal body. Her insistence on her own physical presence and connection to her children precludes an easy acceptance of the separations and substitutions that govern language: she will not, for example, use signifiers to represent her nursing baby, so she cannot tell the story of the baby’s murder. The novel’s discourse also tends to resist substitution, “the very law of metonymic operation” (Rose 38); when the narrative
focuses on either the maternal body or the haunted house, metaphors abandon their symbolic dimension to adhere to a baseline of literal meaning. For instance, a figure of speech in which weight usually means "responsibility" turns out to describe only the physical weight of Sethe's breasts (18). A similar "literализации" of spatial metaphors mimics the materializations in the haunted house: the phrase "she moved him" indicates not that Beloved stirred Paul D's emotions but that she physically moved him, from one location to another (114). The continual shift from the abstract to the concrete creates the illusion of words sliding back to a base in the material world, an effect congruent with Morrison's emphasis on embodiment—on both the physical processes of maternity and the concrete presence of the ghost: "Usually [slavery] is an abstract concept.... The purpose of making [the ghost] real is making history possible, making memory real—somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table, so you have to think about it" (qtd. in Dasling 6).

Describing a child's entry into language as a move from maternal bodily connection to a register of abstract signifiers, Lacan inadvertently sums up the psychological prerequisites for belonging to a patriarchal symbolic order. I invoke his paradigm to point out Morrison's deviations from dominant language practices and from the psychological premises that underlie them. I use the term maternal symbolic to discuss not only an alternative language incorporating maternal and material values but also a system that, like Lacan's symbolic, locates subjects in relation to other subjects. While Sethe operates within her own "maternal symbolic" of presence and connection, it is Denver, Sethe's surviving daughter, who in the end finds a more inclusive replacement for Lacan's paternal symbolic: a social order that confounds oral and verbal pleasures, nurtures her with words, and teaches her that caring is "what language was made for" (252).1

The Maternal Body in Language: A Discourse of Presence

The mother figure of Beloved occupies a contradictory position in discourse. On the one hand, Sethe's self-definition as maternal body enables Morrison to construct a new narrative form—a specifically female quest powered by the desire to get one's milk to one's baby—that features childbirth as high adventure. On the other hand, this same self-definition forecloses Sethe's full participation in language.

In presenting Sethe's journey from slavery in Kentucky to the free state of Ohio as a maternal quest, Morrison is elaborating the figure of the heroic slave mother that in many female slave narratives replaces the figure of the heroic male fugitive. Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, for example, turns the rhetoric of heroic resolve common to male slave narratives into a text of courage drawn from a mother's love for her children: "I was resolved that I would foil my master and save my children, or I would perish in the attempt." "Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for the children's sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage" (84, 89–90). If Jacobs (and other female slave narrators, like Lucy Delaney) appropriates the conventions of male heroism for the celebration of motherhood,2 Morrison in turn reconstructs the acts of maternal heroism as the reproductive feats of the maternal body. Both Sethe and Jacobs find the courage to escape because they want their children to be free—"It was more for my helplessness children than for myself that I longed for freedom," writes Jacobs (89)—but Jacobs's spiritual and emotional commitment becomes in Sethe a physical connection to the nursing baby she has sent on ahead: "I had to get my milk to my baby girl" (16). Sethe, like Jacobs, experiences the wish to give up the fight for survival and die, but while Jacobs says she was "willing to bear on" for the children's sakes (127), the reason that Sethe gives for enduring is the physical presence of the baby in her womb: "[I didn't seem such a bad idea to die]. . . . but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on . . . in her lifetime body grunted her so" that she persevered (31).

The central heroic feat of Sethe's journey is her giving birth in the face of seemingly insuperable obstacles. Alone in the wilderness in a sinking boat on the Ohio River, in a state of
physical injury and exhaustion, Sethe has only Amy, a white runaway indentured servant, to help her. Breaking the silence that has sur-
rounded birth in Western narrative, Morrison provides a physically detailed account of child-
birth, and—also new in Western cultural dis-
course—she gives labor its due as good work. Sethe and Amy “did something together appro-
priately and well” (84).

When Sethe finally wins through to Ohio, the text celebrates not the achievement of freedom, but togetherness; a confusion of prepositions reflects the multiplicity of connections between mother and children: “Sethe lay in bed under, around, over, among but especially with them all” (93). At the triumphant close of her maternal quest, Sethe reports, “I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide;” “she had milk enough for all” (162, 100).

Thus the “nurturing power of the slave mother” (Gates 336) celebrated in women’s slave narra-
tives becomes literal in Morrison’s account: Sethe’s monumental body and abundant milk give and sustain life. But in spite of its mythical dimensions, the maternal body seems to lack a subjective center. During the journey, Sethe ex-
periences her own existence only in relation to her children’s survival; she is “concerned” not for herself but “for the life of her children’s mother.” She thinks, “I believe this baby’s ma’am is gonna die” and pictures herself as “a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby’s last hours” (30, 31, 34).

Sethe maintains this roundabout self-define-
tion through the many images of nursing that picture her as the sustaining ground of her children’s existence; even after the children are weaned, her bond with them remains so strong that she continues to think of it as a nursing connection (100, 162, 200, 216). While celebra-
ting the courage and determination that Sethe draws from this attachment, Morrison’s narra-
tive also dramatizes the problems of Sethe’s maternal subjectivity, which is so embedded in her children that it both allows her to take the life of one of them and precludes putting that act into words.

When Sethe tries to explain her attempt to kill herself and her children to prevent their reen-
slavement, she finds speech blocked: “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around . . . the subject would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask.” A gap remains at the heart of her story, which the omniscient narrator subsequently fills in:

[W]hen she saw the slave owner coming to recap-
sure them, she collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, out, away over there where no one could hurt them . . . where they would be safe. (163)

Sethe extends her rights over her own body—the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery—to the “parts of her” that are her children, folding them back into the maternal body in order to enter death as a single unit (though she succeeded in killing only one of her daughters). The novel withholds judgment on Sethe’s act and persuades the reader to do the same, presenting the infan-
ticide as the ultimate contradiction of mothering under slavery. “It was absolutely the right thing to do, . . . but it’s also the thing you have no right to do,” Morrison commented in an inter-
view (Rothenstein).

Sethe’s sense of continuity with her children also makes it difficult for her to take the position of narrating subject and tell her story. Her troubled relation to language can be read as a carryover from a nursing mother’s attitude to-
ward separation. When she engineered her fam-
ily’s escape from slavery, Sethe had to send her nursing baby ahead of her to Ohio: “I told the women in the wagon . . . to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days [the baby] wouldn’t have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it” (16). Sethe would not compromise with ab-

The standpoint of nursing mother precludes separa-
tion and the substitutions that any separation would require.

Seth's embrace of a relational system of presence and connection, her reluctance to accept the principle of substitution, extends to her refusal to invest in words and helps explain the link between her failure to tell the story of her baby girl's death and that baby's embodiment in Beloved. Lacan's account of a child's entry into language opposes bodily connection and verbal exchange in a way that clarifies Seth's choices. To move into a position in language and the social order, according to Lacan, an infant must sacrifice its imaginary sense of wholeness and continuity with the mother's body. (Seth is of course in the mother's position rather than the child's, but her physical connection with her nursing baby resembles the infant's initial radical dependency on the mother's body.) Lacan later makes the repudiation of maternal continuity an oedipal event, when the social law of the father prohibits the child's access to the maternal body. In "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," however, he borrows from Freud an unmediated mother-child sequence, perhaps to focus more intensely on the either-or choice between bodily presence and abstract signifier. Freud's grandson Ernst becomes a speaking subject in the same moment that he acknowledges his mother's absence. Throwing a spool out of his crib and bringing it back to the accompaniment of sounds ("ooool aaaaal") that Freud interprets as "Fort! Da!" ("Gone! There!"), the baby assumes a symbolic mastery over what he cannot control in reality — his mother's presence and absence. (Freud, Pleasure 8-10.) Lacan adds that the child "thereby raises his desire to a second power," investing desire in language (103). By acknowledging that he must put a signifier there, where his mother's body used to be, the child both recognizes absence and accepts loss. The word "manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing" (104), or in John Muller's gloss, "the word destroys the immediacy of objects and gives us distance from them." (29). It is this distance, this loss, that Seth rejects. Just as she declined any mediation between her body and her nursing baby, insisting on presence, she now refuses to replace that baby with a signifier, to accept the irre-vocability of absence by putting the child's death into words. Her denial of loss is fundamentally antimelancholic — that is, the refusal to displace libido onto words is a refusal to let one thing stand for another and so impedes the whole project of speech. Seth remains without a narrative but with the baby ghost — there, embodied, concrete presence.

Through Seth's reluctance to substitute words for things, not just Beloved but all the painful events of the past that Seth has not transformed into narrative are left there, where those events first occurred. [What I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened," Seth tells Denver (36). The plot reflects this spatialized time, as incidents from the past occupy the various rooms in which they originally took place. In the shed, the murder replays, at least for Beloved; in the keeping room, an injured and demoralized Seth once more gets bathed in "sections" by loving hands; and a white man "coming into [Seth's] yard" triggers a repeat of her murderous attack — with a saving difference (123-24, 272, 262). The plot—present time—cannot move forward because Seth's space is crammed with the past:

When she woke the house was on fire: there was the door where the soda crackers were lined up in a row; the white stairs her baby girl loved to climb; the corner where Baby Suggs mended shoes . . . the exact place on the stove where Denver burned her fingers . . . there was no room for any other thing or body . . . . (39)

There are no gaps in Seth's world, no absences to be filled in with signifiers; everything is there, an oppressive plenitude.

Language reinforces the sense that materializations clog the haunted house: spatial images that usually function as figures of speech take shape as actions. For example, when Paul D, a former slave from the same plantation as Seth, finds her again after an absence of eighteen years, he feels out his chances for establishing a relationship with her by asking if "there was some space" for him (45). While his expression seems natural in the circumstances, the situation in the
house causes Paul D to make a space for himself more literally than any suitor in literature: "[H]olding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house" (18). Evidently Morrison wants the opening statement of the novel—that "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (3)—to be taken quite literally. Before the dead baby takes the shape of Beloved, her amorphous spirit haunts the house, filling it so completely with her spite that "[t]here was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D . . . broke up the place, making room, . . . then standing in the place he had made" (39).

After Paul D exorcises the ghost from the horse and it returns in the shape of Beloved, spatial metaphors continue to reflect the materialization of things that belong by rights in a spiritual realm. The sentence "She moved him," for example, opens a chapter about Beloved's domestic relations with Paul D (114). Because the grammatical object of moved is a human being—how rather than it—the phrase seems at first glance to operate figuratively, as in "she affected him emotionally." But the spiritual meaning quickly gives way to physical actuality as it becomes clear that Paul D "was being moved" literally (126)—out of Seth's bed, out of the living room, finally out of the house altogether—by Beloved's jealous desire to expel her rival.

Textual practice similarly seconds Sethe's emphasis on presence by rejecting metaphorical substitutions for the maternal body. In the opening scene, after Sethe has told Paul D about her quest to get her milk to her baby in Ohio, he cups her breasts from behind in a display of tenderness: "What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (18). The reader does a double take: the phrase "in somebody else's hands" usually functions as a metaphor meaning "someone else's responsibility"; here the hands are literally there, and what rests in them is not an abstract concept but flesh. The same slippage occurs in the next sentence, as Sethe imagines being "relied of the weight of her breasts" (18). Because weight appears within the usually figurative phrase "relied of the weight of," readers assume that it is a metaphor for care or responsibility, but the modifying phrase "of her breasts" gives weight back its literal meaning. When the maternal body becomes the locus of discourse, the metaphorical becomes the actual, a move that reinforces Sethe's definition of motherhood as embodied responsibility: there are no substitutes, metaphorical or otherwise, for her breasts.

In the same passage, Paul D "reads" the story of slavery engraved on Sethe's back by a final savage beating. Because the scar tissue is without sensation—"her back skin had been dead for years" (18)—Sethe's back is, in a sense, not her own; it has been appropriated and reified as a tablet on which the slave masters have inscribed their code. She cannot substitute for this discourse of violence even her own version of the event, in spite of Paul D's insistence (over the space of three pages) that she tell him about it. Sethe refuses, repeating instead Amy Denver's description of the wound left by the whipping as "a whole tree . . . in bloom": "I got a tree on my back. . . . I've never seen it and never will. But that's what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves" (15-16). The metaphor masks suffering and puts it at the distance of a beautiful image—an act of poetic detachment appropriate, perhaps, to Amy's position of onlooker after the event but not to Sethe's subjective experience of pain. Unable to seize the word and thus become master of her own experience, Sethe remains "a body whose flesh . . . bears . . . the marks of a cultural text" that inscribes her as slave (Spillers 67). Sethe's problematic relation to language results from her position as body not only in a maternal order but also in a social order that systematically denied the subject position to those it defined as objects of exchange. In the absence of a speaking subject, Morrison makes the most of body language, as the passage I have been analyzing, quadro in full, shows:

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her neck and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it, its wide trunk and intricate branches. . . . [He] would tolerate no
peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. When he knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands.

Would there be a little space, she wondered, a
little time, some way to . . . just stand there a minute or two . . . relieved of the weight of her breasts . . . and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?

(17-18)

On Sethe's back, the extreme of a patriarchal symbolic order "recast . . . in the terms of cul-
tural domination" (Aibel 187), a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers 67); on her front, the locus of a maternal system of relations based on presence and connection: Paul D, flexible man, "reads" both stories through touch, quickly be-
coming a participant in Sethe's discourse of bodily connection. Implicit in the space Paul D's kind body protects is the possibility of yet a third relational system: Sethe thinks that with him there she might feel safe enough to "go inside," "feel the hurt her back ought to," and thus replace the outside language the slave owners imprinted on her body with an inner language of articulate memory; she might be able to tell her story (46, 18). But the potential for reclaim-
ing her past along with its pain is not realized till Paul D re-creates this holding space in the last scene, enabling Sethe to move into the position of narrating subject from a base in physical intimacy. First she has to live out the unspeak-
able drama of the past that postulates the house — a symbiosis with her daughter that would only have been appropriate eighteen years before, when Beloved was a surlingl in body as well as in spirit.

Who Is Beloved?

In part 2, Sethe lives out the dream of sustaining her ghastly daughter with her own substance — a nursing fantasy writ large. On the personal level, Beloved is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in Beloved, the ghost rep-
resents —as the generic name Beloved suggests — all the loved ones lost through slavery, begin-
ning with the Africans who died on the slave ships. In one sense, then, the pain that haunts Sethe's house is nothing special: "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (5). Accordingly, Beloved's message means "not thing to those within the family circle and another thing altogether to those who listen from outside the house, from the vantage point of the community.

Morrison introduces the conversation of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver that takes up most of part 2 as "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (199): in its drive toward unity, the mother-daughter dia-
logue wipes out all the positions of separation necessary to language, and it is in this sense "unspeakable." But Stamp Paid, who listens from outside, from social ground, hears in Be-
lowed's speech a whole chorus of "the black and angry dead," a communal "roaring" that is "unspeakable" because the accumulated suffer-
ings under slavery overwhelm the expressive possibilities of ordinary discourse (198, 181, 199). What cannot be encompassed within the symbolic order continues to haunt it, hovering on the edge of language.

Beloved herself ends up outside social dis-
course, wandering, after the narrative's conclu-
sion, in a limbo where she is "[d]isremembered and uncounted for" (274). Her position in the epilogue is symmetrical with that of the "Sixty Million and more" of Morrison's epigraph. Hav-
ing perished on the slave ships midway between a place in African history and a place in the history of American slavery, these lost souls never made it into any text. Lost still, they remain stranded in the epigraph, where their human features are erased beneath a number; they are quantified in death, as they had been in life by a property system that measured wealth in terms of a body count. Morrison's "and more" indicates the residue left over, lost out, unac-
counted for by any text — like Beloved at the end. Denver gestures toward the larger dimension of Beloved's identity when she responds to Paul D's question "You think [the ghost] sure know your sister?" with an echo of the epigraph: "At times. At times I think she was — more" (266). Morrison is unwilling, apparently, to leave the
historical parallel at the level of suggestion. She links Beloved to the “Sixty Million and more” by joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships. But first, in a monologue that comes out of nowhere, Beloved gives an account of slave ship experience:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead... in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me... he locks his eyes and dies on my face... the others do not know that he is dead. (211-12)

Since Morrison does not identify these scattered perceptions as observations of life on a slave ship or tell how Beloved came to be there or give any coordinates of time and place, readers are baffled: they have no idea where they are. Their confusion thus initiates the disorientation of the Africans who were thrown into the slave ships without explanation, suspended without boundaries in time and space, “in movement across the Atlantic but... also nowhere at all... inasmuch as... the captive[s]... did not know where [they were].” The fragmented syntax and absence of punctuation rob the reader of known demarcations, creating a linguistic equivalent of the Africans’ loss of differentiation in an “oceanic” space that “unmade” cultural identities and erased even the lines between male and female, living and dead (Spillers 72).

Readers who try to understand these unsetting images as metaphors for Beloved’s passage from death to life can find a basis for doing so in the African American narrative tradition, which pictures the Middle Passage as a journey toward a horrific rebirth. (Robert Hayden calls the Middle Passage a “voyage through death to life upon these shores” [48, 54]; Richard Wright remarks, “We millions of black folk who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth” [121]). The nightmare collage of bodies piled on bodies in the slave ship, where it is hard to tell the living from the dead, would then figure Beloved’s difficulty in discerning, in her transitional state, whether she is alive or dead, traveling toward death or toward life. But Morrison everywhere demands that readers confront the horrors of slavery “in the flesh” rather than at the comfortable distance of metaphor (qtd. in Darling 5). “I wanted that haunting not to be really a suggestion of being bothered by the past,” she comments, “but to have it be incarnate” (qtd. in Rothstein). What at first appears symbolic becomes actual in a characteristic collapse of metaphor into literal reality—a slippage that accompanies the central materialization of the novel, Beloved’s embodiment. Scattered through Beloved’s monologue are fragments that form the following sequence. Beloved becomes attached to the face of a woman actually on the slave ships, follows the woman’s body into the sea after the sailors throw it overboard, and “joins” with it: the woman’s “face comes through the water... her face is mine... I have to have my face... she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face” (211-13). Beloved returns, then, in the body of one of the original “disappeared,” and all her gestures are shadowed by a larger historical outline. Or, as she herself sees it, “All of it is now it is always now”: “the unnumbered losses of slavery are collected in Beloved, in a temporal space outside the linear time of history” (210).

But Beloved is also the one-year-old baby that Sethe killed. Morrison skillfully exploits the parallels between a spirit in search of a body and a preverbal child who desires a merger with her mother. To both, the boundaries between persons are permeable, permitting a “join,” and both project this identity confusion as a dialectic of faces. As disembodied spirit, Beloved says, “I need to find a place to be,” with the words “to be” taking on all the urgency of their literal meaning. Neither her language nor her need to find a support for her existence changes, however, when it is her mother’s face that she needs: “I need to find a place to be... [Sethe’s] smiling face is the place for me” (213). The ghost’s insistence on becoming embodied blends, in Morrison’s song of desire, with the preverbal child’s dependence on the maternal face as a mirror of her own existence.
Beloved wants from words the verbal equivalent of a face that reflects her exactly as she is, masquerading her of her own existence and of her identity with her mother. In the mother-daughter dialogue that follows her monologue, language binds to Beloved’s desire. While a spoken dialogue (ideally) moves toward something new, with the difference voiced by one speaker moving the other speaker away from his or her original position, the dialogue among the three women imitates a mother-infant dialectic: it is motivated not by difference but by the desire to ascertain that the other is there and that the other is the same. It “moves” only toward the status of interreflecting mirrors, ending in identical statements wherein like mirrors like:

You are mine.
You are mine.
You are mine.

(217)

What happens to language here reflects what happens in the female family circle, as Sethe (and Denver, for a time) is persuaded by Beloved’s preodipal understanding that the mother is an extension of the self: “I am not separate from her...there is no place where I stop” (210). Punctuation disappears, leaving the sentence of each participant open to the sentence of the next speaker, and the personal pronouns I and you move toward each other, losing their difference first to become interchangeable and then to mesh in the possessive mine. Initially, some difference remains. Sethe and Denver say:

You are my sister.
You are my daughter.

to which Beloved responds:

You are my face; you are me.

(216)

In Sethe’s and Denver’s lines, normative language reflects normative family life. Separate pronouns correspond to the separate positions of family members who are connected only in the circumscribed ways authorized by conventional kinship structures. Beloved’s statement, though, overthrows the classifications that locate persons in cultural space, insisting on a closer relationship than either language or family law allows: “you are me.”

“You are my face, I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?” With this line, Beloved completes the limited and stubborn logic of the preodipal: if I am you, there is no leeway for separation, you cannot leave me. In the lines

I have your milk...
I brought your milk

the nursing connection erodes the distinctions of the symbolic by making the boundary between “you” and “me” soluble (216). Is the milk that the baby drinks part of the baby or part of the mother? Does the “I” in “I have your milk” refer to Sethe, who might be saying that she “has” (is carrying) Beloved’s milk, or to Beloved, who could just as well be the “I” who speaks, saying that she “has” Sethe’s milk inside her? The de differentiation of possessive pronouns dramatizes the impossibility of separating what belongs to the one body from what belongs to the other when the two are joined by the nipple or, rather, by the milk that flows between them, blurring borders.

Nursing serves as a figure for the totality and exclusivity of mother-daughter liaison: “Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children,” says Sethe, turning inward, and Beloved completes the circle, “lapping devotion like cream” (200, 245). Since Beloved has moved Paul D out and thus demolished the shadowy oedipal triangle (“the three shadows who held hands” [47, 49]) that threatened her hold on her mother, no father figure diverts Sethe’s attention from her baby, and no “paternal signifier” points Beloved toward a larger symbolic order. She gets to live out the preodipal wish “to be the exclusive desire of the mother” (Lacan, “Les formations” 14; qtd. in Rose 38).

The nursing paradigm does not work as the governing principle of family life, though. “Beloved... never get enough of anything: hula hoops, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk... When Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire” (246). As preverbal infant, Beloved has not
accepted the law of symbolic substitutions with which Freud's grandson made his peace, so no partial gift will do. She wants a total union with the mother, to have her and to be her. The text literalizes a nursing baby's fantasy of oral greed consuming the breast, the mother, and all (Klein 200-01): Sethe wastes away while Denver becomes "bigger, plumper by the day" (239). This drama of oral incorporation is also appropriate to Beloved's role as the past that sucks up all Sethe's energies, leaving nothing for "a life" with a present and future (46).

"You are mine" is of course what the save owners said, and as in the larger social order, the disregard of the other as subject, the appropriation of the other to one's own desires, leads to violence. Although now Beloved's disregard of limits eats up Sethe's life, the logic of "You are mine" originally permitted Sethe to exercise life-or-death rights over the children she conceived as "parts of her" (163).

A Maternal Symbolic

It is Denver, Sethe's surviving daughter, who in part 3 initiates the breakup of this self-consum- ing mother-child circle. Impelled by the need to get food for her starving mother, she moves into the larger community, but the search for food is aligned with her own "hunger" for learning. Denver joins a social order of language and exchange that both feeds her and teaches her to read. Morrison thus rewrites the entry into the symbolic in terms that retain the oral and ma-ternal, challenging the orthodox psychoanalytic opposition between a maternal order of nurtur- ing and a paternal order of abstract signification.

From the beginning, Denver's development reverses Lacan's maturational sequence: what Morrison explicitly calls Denver's "original hun- ger" is not for the mother's body but for words (118, 121). At the age of seven, after a year of reading lessons, Denver abandons language to avoid learning the truth about her mother's murder of her sister. She becomes deaf and dumb for two years, "cut off by an answer she could not bear to hear." Since the period of silence follows the period of verbal exchange, Denver's nostalgia focuses not on a past of mute connec- tion with the mother's body but on a time of verbal jouissance—delight in "the capital w, the little i, the beauty of the letters in her name, the deeply mournful sentences from the Bible Lady Jones used as a textbook" (103, 102). Not for Denver the normal progress from oral to verbal, from the breast that fills the baby's mouth to verbal substitutes that never quite do so and always leave something to be desired. Instead, words give Denver the pleasures of the mouth, as the confusion of learning with eating implies: "sentences rolled out like pie dough"; Lady Jones "watched her eat up a page, a rule, a figure" (121, 247).

What causes Denver to give up nourishing words for the hunger of not speaking? As a young girl, she lives out the unspeakable, as if to keep her mother's silence intact by locking it up in her body. Her empty ear and empty mouth reproduce in a corporeal language the empty place at the center of the text where her mother's story of the infanticide should be. In Freud's model of hysterical conversion, the symptom enacts the content of a repressed desire; here the paralysis of ear and throat represents not Den- ver's desire—her own primal hunger is for words—but her mother's wish that the story remain unspoken, the act unnamed, the memory re-pressed. Denver in effect closes herself up in her mother's silence. At the same time, she gives up her initial indifference to the ghost and begins to "fix [her concentration] on the baby ghost" (103). The complement of her mother's silence is the concrete presence of Beloved, the literalization of what Sethe refuses to abstract into words. When Denver goes "deaf rather than hear the answer, and [keeps] watch for the baby and [withdraw] from everything else" (105), she is retreating into her mother's world, making the rejection of speech and the obsession with the unnamed her own.

The paralysis of Denver's development shows how urgent is the need for a story that will make sense of the baby's death, mark the baby's disappearance, and lay her and the past she represents to rest. Even after Denver returns to speech and hearing, she lacks the narrative con-
text to deal with the baby's death on a conscious level, so she processes it unconsciously in "monstrous and unmanageable dreams" about her mother: "She cut my head off every night" (103, 296). The unconscious, notorious for repetition without resolution, endlessly plays out dream derivatives of the repressed signifier. Meanwhile, the nonsignifying word thing marks the gap left by the signifier repressed from conscious thought: "certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her" in response to questions about her mother. Freud remarks that the unconscious operates by means of "thing presentation" rather than "word presentation" ("Unconscious" 201). In Denver's idiom the unconscious marker "thing" fills the gap where conscious significance fails. It represents something in her own unconscious: "the thing that leapt up in her... was a thing that had been lying there all along" (102; my emphasis). Sethe's inability to confront and articulate her action—she hears primary process noises rather than conscious sequential thought when she tries to tell Paul D about the baby's death—results in the unsignified "thing" being lodged like a lump, undigestible and unsignifiable, in her child's unconscious, where it generates the repeated dream of decapitation.15

When Denver tries to leave the haunted house to get food for her mother and Beloved, she finds herself imprisoned within her mother's time—a time that, clinging to places, is always happening again. "Out there... were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again... Denver stood on the porch... and couldn't leave it." She crosses the threshold into social discourse only when the voice of Baby Suggs, the ancestor, speaks out: "You mean I never told you... nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps?" (243-44). To a child afraid to step out into the world, the particulars of how that world damaged her grandmother and mother are hardly comforting. It is the speech act itself, the voice of the grand-

mother putting the past where it belongs, into oral history, that frees Denver to enter the present.

After Denver leaves the closed family circle, she goes straight to the place of verbal nurturance, the house of Lady Jones, the woman who had taught her to read some ten years earlier. However belatedly (she is by now eighteen), she takes the crucial step from the imaginary of mother-daughter fusions to the symbolic order of language and society. But this step does not entail abandoning maternal intimacy. "Oh, baby," says Lady Jones when Denver tells her about her starving mother. "[I]t was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman." Lady Jones's maternal language indicates that Denver is a child of the community, not just of her mother: "Everybody's child was in that face." She bakes raisin loaves for Denver while teaching her to read Bible verses, and "all through the spring, names appeared near or in gifts of food" (248, 246, 250, 249). Morrison then confounds the distinction between words and good things to eat, between oral and verbal pleasures.

Denver moves into the symbolic by leaving one nurturing maternal circle for another, but there is a difference. The community, which operates as a network of mutual aid (originally, the network helped slaves escape), takes offense at Sethe's claim of maternal self-sufficiency—"she had milk enough for all"—and demands instead a reciprocal nurturing. "To belong to a community of other free Negroes is to love and be loved by them. . . . to feed and be fed." Denver enters into this nurturing reciprocity, "paying" a thank you for half a pie, "paying" for help by telling her story (100, 177, 252, 253).

Acts of maternal care also enable Sethe to move into an order of linguistic exchange. After the community of women intervenes and routs Beloved,17 Sethe retreats into the keeping room in an imitation of Baby Suggs, who withdrew thence to die. "I think I've lost my mother," Denver tells Paul D: the loss of Beloved entails the loss of Sethe, who is still attached to her baby
(266). When Paul D offers to sathe her, taking the restorative maternal role once occupied by Baby Suggs (93, 98), Sethe can only protest that she is "nothing . . . now . . . Nothing left to bathe." Then a consciousness of her body begins to emerge: "Will he [bathe her] in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (272). Gone is her self-image as maternal life-giver (her breasts are "exhausted" now, after the ordeal of sustaining Beloved); she puts herself together anew, imitating in her fear of fragmentation the first infantile self-image, the body in pieces, that precedes the cohesion of the mirror stage and motor control (Lacan, "Mirror Stage") 4. After the body, the spirit revives. Suddenly freed from the "serious work of beating back the past," Sethe lets all the losses she has repressed flood into her mind: "this she called, but Howard and Buglar walked on down the railroad track and couldn't hear her; that Amy was scared to stay with her because she . . . back looked so bad; that her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere." Having confronted her grief consciously, Sethe quickly moves to put loss into words: "She left me" (73, 272). The act of acknowledging absence and saying "she" splits Beloved off, detaches her from the maternal body that has held the nursing connection static, entombed, and puts a signer there, where the child's body had been.

In thus shifting from a subjectivity embedded in maternal connection to a subjectivity based on the separate positions of the linguistic register (she and me), Sethe indeed follows the Lacanian schema, in which taking the position of speaking subject requires a repudiation of continuity with the mother's body (or, for Sethe, with the nursing infant's body). But Morrison revises Lacan here, too, softening his opposition between bodily communion and the abstractions of verbal exchange: "She was my best thing," Sethe says of her lost daughter. Paul D "leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers." Sethe answers, "Me? Me?" expressing surprise and disbelief, perhaps, but also recognizing herself in the first-person singular (272-73). Replacing Lacan's vision of the move into language—a move away from bodies touching to the compensations of abstract signifiers—Morrison makes physical contact the necessary support for Sethe's full acceptance of the separate subjectivity required by language systems. Though Paul D thus encircles Sethe physically, his intent is not to subsume her. The words "You are," standing alone, replace "You are mine," the hallmark of invasive identification in the mother-daughter dialogue. Paul D "wants to put his story next to hers"; the two stories may complement and complete each other (each person having lived out the missing fragment of the other's slave narrative), but they will lie "next to" each other—each whole, circumscribed, with its own beginning, middle, and end (273). Difference can emerge within the space of relationship; a dialogue between self and other can replace the circular mother-daughter dialectic between same and same.

The hope at the end of the novel is that Sethe, having recognized herself as subject, will narrate the mother-daughter story and invent a language that can encompass the desperation of the slave mother who killed her daughter. Or will she? The heterosexual resolution, the enclosure of the mother in the symbolic, leaves out the precordial daughter, who wanders lost in the epilogue. She will not be remembered because "nobody anywhere knew her name"; she is "[d]isremembered and unaccounted for" because "they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that . . . she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too." Outcast both as victim of slavery whose death is unspeakable and as preverbal infant who has not made her way into the symbolic order, Beloved remains outside language and therefore outside narrative memory. Her story is "not a story to pass on" (274-75). Of course, the sentence is ambiguous: Beloved's story, too terrible to find resolution in the k-opic of narrative, cannot be passed on from teller to teller, but it also cannot "pass on," or die (35). It continues to haunt the borders of a symbolic order that excludes it.
Notes

Margaret Homans's notion of literalization enabled me to see how Morrison's metaphor work. "Literalization," which "may take in some phrase of events imagery, a slant, a staple or an extended or conspicuous metaphor, is translated into an actual event or circumstance," is in Homans's opinion a characteristic of women's writing (39).

Homans uses Nancy Chodorow's theory to challenge Lacan: between men and women develop differently, women may not polarize body and word, signifier and absent referent, to the extent that men do; thus women writers are less likely to privilege the figurative over the literal and most likely to conceive of presence as communicative with representation (4).

As a white middle-class feminist who practices psychoanalytic theory, I come to this project burdened not only by the usual guilt about my own implication in the racist structures that Morrison unques-But also by doubts about the suitability of psychoanalytic theory for analyzing an African American text. Psychoanalytic theory is, after all, based on assumptions about family and language grounded in Western European patriarchal culture, while Morrison's novel comes out of African and African American oral and written narrative traditions (see Christian, Holloway, Page, Sale, Street). Elizabet h Aher's essay "Race, Class, and Psychoanalytic" performs an important service to feminist psychoanalysis by narrating the difficulties of applying psychoanalytic texts produced by other cultures and the possibilities for modifying object-relations theory and La- canian theory to include "the roles of race and class in a diversified construction of subjectivity" (164). Reading Abdi's essay both focused the limitations of my position as white middle-class female reader of an African American woman's text and gave me the language to "[K]now it, and go on out the road" (Morrison 26)—to go on in spite of recognizing the hazards of writing into a cultural space not my own.

Vivian Curby points out that "slaves narratives by women, about women, could mobilize the narrative forms of adven- ture and historical consciousness constituted within, normative of male sexuality" (38). Lucy Delaney, for instance, describes her mother's struggle to free her children in epic terms: "She had guided ud on the hunted path to freedom; they would never be caught again to share in the ruel as a master's child."

"The search for the ideal slave mother (the grandmother) in Sain's narrative (199-10)." Sain may hesitate to tell her story in part because the language available to her—a language structured by the logic of bipedal oppositions—cannot readily encompass the con-
tradictions of motherhood under slavery. Had she the access to it, Sain would find in the discourse of actual slave mothers a language better suited to a world where "safe from slavery can only mean "dead."

Jean Wyatt
that "both signify and displace [the lost object]," and "incorp-
oration," a refusal of loss in which one preserves the lost object as a (reconstructed) part of one's own body (68). In black Sun Julia Kristeva also identifies the melancholic problem that fails to interiorize libido from the body connecting the mother to words; she or he maintains instead an undifferen-
tiated sense of continuity with the maternal body.

Characteristically, Sefte can articulate only the part of the abuse connected with her maternal function. "Now I took my milk," she repeats (56, 17). In Anne Goldman's view, "schoolteacher orphans [Sefte's milk] to be appropri-
bated because, as the one product of her labor that doesn't belong to the master, it is the "signifier of an identity," a subjectivity, independent of white authority" (124). Mae Vandiver understands the theft of her mother's milk as the expression of Sefte's future—her inability to nurture and ensure the survival of the future offspring in the next generation... She must do so in some way of registering control of her story, her body, her progeny, her milk, her ability to nurture the future (71)." According to the point out that the next... "milk" Sefte at the behest of school-teacher, who... wants to make the experiment as part of his "scientific observation" of slaves. Christian aligns school-
teacher, who measures slaves' body parts and observes their bodily functions with "apparently neutral" scientific curios-
ity, with the thirteenth-century white American intellectuals who buttressed slavery with various "scientific" treatises on the physiology of African Americans (37-39).

Mary Austin's essay helped me understand slavery as a system of domination that mandated slaves' "absence from a subject position" while imposing the terms of their subjugation on their bodies (67). By emphasizing the importance of language to a "used-to-
be slave woman," Morrison takes up a central theme of slave narratives (45). "Only by grasping the world could slaves, even in slavery, make use of the language they heard, of the public life that activities in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life in the only languages of public language that public life 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Nicolas Abraham cites similar cases, in which an unarticulated secret passes directly from a parent's unconscious to a child's unconscious. The child does not consciously know what the secret is but nevertheless acts it out, driven by a thing lodged in its unconscious that fits into both its conscious wishes nor its unconscious fantasies. "What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the sanitizing power of the living" (75).

Missy Dehn Kubitschek identifies yet another maternal discourse in Beloved: "she reads the woman's roar that casts Beloved out as an imitation of "the sounds accompanying birth" (174). Morrison's text replaces the biblical verse, "In the beginning was the Word, ... and the Word was God" (John 1, 1) with the line, "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and all sound in the beginning that sound sounded like." (329). The women's communal grail reveals women's creation of life, not God's, and overthrows the male authority of the word. Kubitschek's chapter on Beloved includes Sethe's need to change the static conception of motherhood she developed under slavery.

As Marianne Hirsch writes, Sethe's "autobiography... can only emerge in and through human unconvention" (198). I differ with Hirsch because she ignores the hiatus in the middle of Sethe's narrative and regards Sethe as a mother who tells her story throughout (8). Hirsch also says that Sethe's "maternal voice and subjectivity" emerge only in the concluding scene, when her "Me, Me?" implies "that she questions, at least for a moment, the hierarchy of motherhood over adulthood on which her life had hinged until that moment" (7).

\[ \text{Morrison may have D. W. Winnicott's maternal "holding" environment in mind. Like Morrison, Winnicott pictures development as a joint project of self and other (mother) rather than as a movement toward increasing separation. Only in the presence of the mother can the infant be truly "I."} \]

In the presence of the mother, the infant can be truly "I." That is, the mother's presence releases the infant from survival needs and enables it to claim its impulses as authentically its own—hence to catch the first glimpse of an ongoing subjectivity ("Capacity") 34. Just so, Paul D's holding guarantees a space in which Sethe can safely think any thought, feel any feeling, and finally take the leap into a different subjectivity grounded in language. Morrison's ideal of heterosexual relations for the "holding factory" that is the novel. Martin's chapter on Paul D's story and Sethe's story, showing how Paul D comes to a new definition of masculinity. Kent Cummings also traces Paul D's development from a default of masculinity that ensues him to the white slave master who named him to an identification with Sam's different model of masculinity—a shift that culminates in his taking up the job of mothering. Sethe. Cummings lasts mothering as one of three modes of resistance, along with mourning and naming. "Mothering provides the final and most fundamental opposition, for through it the subject is reconstituted and the body rebores in the flesh" (303, 304).}

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\[ \text{Works Cited} \]


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