Revisions of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Toni Morrison, a writer with a very strong historical sense, has always been conscious of the importance of coming to terms with the past and of the empowering value of history to African Americans. Having noticed that black Americans had long been cut off from their past, she set out to edit *The Black Book* (1974), an illustrative compendium of three centuries of black American life.[1] It is, to quote Morrison, a "genuine Black history book," aiming not to romanticize or glorify the African past or the American past, but rather to "recollect" 300 years of black life as "lived" experience ("Behind" 89). To Morrison, history is an important form of knowledge through which blacks can reclaim or reconstruct their past, which has long been silenced, repressed, or erased by the white dominant culture.

Morrison's concern with history has not only driven her to edit black history books such as *The Black Book*, but to write black history into her novels. Like Ralph Ellison and other black cultural nationalists, she constantly returns to history to find something for her art. As she told Bessie Jones, "[W]hat makes one write anyway is something in the past that is haunting, that is not explained or wasn't clear so that you are almost constantly rediscovering the past. I am geared toward the past, I think, because it is important to me; it is living history" (Jones and Vinson 127). With the characters being both subjects *of* and subject *to* history, Morrison's novels, all ingrained in African American history, serve to "bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded" (Morrison, "Memory" 389). They have examined black life spanning from the beginning of African American history to its living present. Black experiences in such different historical periods as the Middle Passage, slavery, the Civil War, the Reconstruction, World War I, the great Depression, World War II, and the contemporary, have found expression in Morrison's novels, and her depiction of the impacts of racial oppression and historical change on ordinary black people is particularly compelling.

This essay is an attempt to study how Morrison revisions (black)history, especially slavery, in her highly acclaimed novel *Beloved* (1987), a novel best exempli-

fying the working of her historical consciousness and imagination. My observation is that Morrison is a rare writer who, successfully blending politics and poetics, revisions in her novels black history in such a way that they not only provided a vivid portrait of black life as actually lived experience but have preserved valuable racial memory and endowed black history with new and significant meanings. Her revisions of black history in her novels, especially in *Beloved*, have filled in the blank pages of U.S. history the missing or unwritten part related to African Americans and have thus testified that she is indeed a strong black cultural nationalist.[2]

I

Among Morrison's works, *Beloved*--by far her best novel--is the one that confronts African American history most unflinchingly.[3] Set in the 19th-century Reconstruction era, *Beloved* is developed through a series of actions, dialogues, and flashbacks trigggered by Paul D's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, inhabited by Sethe and her daughter Denver. The house used to be occupied by Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, and her three children. Baby Suggs died nine years ago and Sethe's two sons ran away because they could not stand the haunting baby ghost. After Paul D drives away the baby ghost of Sethe's slain daughter, which has been haunting them for eighteen years, it comes back in flesh-and-blood form, called herself Beloved. The newly arrived Beloved cheers the lonely Denver and endears herself to Sethe, but she also isolates Paul D from the family. Later when Beloved becomes threatening to Sethe's life, Denver breaks out of her self-enclosure and reaches out to solicit the assistance of her black neighbors. Thirty women from the black community come to aid and exorcise Sethe's house of Beloved the ghost. At the end of the novel, Sethe finds solace in Paul D and seems to see hope beyond the horizon. Denver also finds a job and begins to lead a normal life.

If in *Song of Solomon* Milkman's knowledge of his ancestor's connection with slavery is, according to Susan Willis, "liberational" because, instead of portraying slavery as the origin of black American history and culture, "the novel opens out to Africa, the source, and takes flight on the wings of Milkman's great-grandfather, the original Solomon" (271-72), in *Beloved*, by contrast, the character's memory or "rememory" of slavery is drastically different, because there is only flight from slavery and no sense of liberation. The novel, to all intents and purposes, deals with the agony and horror cast by slavery on black people. Before proceeding to discuss how slavery as a peculiar system in the U.S. history determines the fate of the black characters in *Beloved*, however, it is worth stressing here that ever since Africans were captured and shipped to the new World as slaves in the seventeenth century, the institution of slavery had tormented the African American's body and soul so excruciat-

ingly that even its ending (nominal at least) in 1863 could not stop the pain. In fact, today's blacks still suffer in one way or another from the psychological scar wrought by slavery.

The prevalence of illiteracy prevented almost all of the slaves from writing about their own experiences. Illiteracy also deprived them of their sense of time and of self; what they had was only memory. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, "Slavery's time was delineated by memory and memory alone. . . . The slave had lived at no time past the point of recollection" (*Figures* 100-01). The slaves' dependence on memory accounted for the scarcity of written records about their life. As a consequence, there is a huge gap in black American history, the most conspicuous one being its very beginning. Very few documents related to the experiences of the Middle Passage have been preserved. In effect, before Morrison wrote *Beloved*, few writers, black or white, creative or critical, had ever plunged themselves into that "unspeakable" part of African American history, because, as Morrison says, it is something "black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember [sic]" (Angelo 48). Slavery as an institution had been placed under erasure by what Morrison calls a "national amnesia" (Angelo 48), and the experience of the Middle Passage--the most traumatic of all the horrors produced by slavery--has practically disappeared from American cultural memory.

In view of the fact that slavery had not been adequately described on the imaginative level, Morrison decided to write a historical novel revisioning the 300-year history of American slavery, even though she has a "terrible reluctance about dwelling on that era" (Angelo 48). In memory of the dead in the aftermath of slavery, she dedicates the novel to the "Sixty Million and more."[4]

II

Many critics have pointed out that Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, has her origin in "real" history.[5] Morrison herself concedes that the story is based on a historical fact. As she told Gloria Naylor, the novel was inspired by "two or three little fragments of stories" that she had "heard from different places" (Naylor 584-85).[6] While collecting materials for *The Black Book*, Morrison came across the story of Margaret Garner, which struck her immensely. According to the news report, Margaret Garner was a slave who in January 1856 escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky.[7] Like Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published four years later, Margaret Garner escaped to freedom across the Ohio River and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati, Ohio. She was, however, pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers, who surrounded the house where she, her husband, and their four children were sheltered. Her husband shot at one of the officers and

wounded one of them before he was overpowered. Seeing that their dream of freedom was broken, Margaret Garner seized a butcher knife on the table, cut the throat of her favorite little daughter, and tried in vain to kill the other children and herself. She was captured and taken to prison.

Margaret Garner's act of infanticide was a subject for abolitionist publications at the time and is still a reminder of the atrocities associated with slavery. Her choosing death for both herself and her daughter rather than having themselves subjected to slavery gave Morrison inspiration and eventually Margaret's story becomes the historical analogue of *Beloved*'s plot. Morrison's appropriation of Margaret Garner's story in *Beloved* shows her intention to revise and revitalize that part of black history which has long been suppressed and buried. Written with double perspectives, Morrison's novel has, paradoxically, both remembered and forgotten, accused and embraced, and buried and revived Margaret Garner and many other black slaves who lost their lives under the hideous system of slavery.

Thematically and structurally, Beloved is very similar to such famous slave narratives as *Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, An American Slave and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[8] Like those slave narratives, *Beloved* offers the personal accounts of black slaves and ex-slaves of their experiences in slavery and of their efforts to obtain freedom. It recounts not only stories of the slaves in the Sweet Home plantation, including Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D, Halle Suggs, and Sixo, but those of ex-slaves living in Cincinnati, such as Stamp Paid and Ella. Like slave narratives, *Beloved* deals with the collective destiny of all these slaves in quest of freedom through flight. By extension, Morrison does not merely write about Margaret Garner/Sethe's story; she also writes on behalf of the millions of silent slaves all over America and on behalf of the "Sixty Million and more" who could not make it through the Middle Passage. Like those slave narratives, the novel is "a communal utterance, a collective tale" (Gates, "Introduction" x).

Admittedly, all Morrison's novels address themselves to the issue of racism in the United States; yet, among them, *Beloved* is the one that depicts whites' inhumanity to blacks most graphically. Through Morrison's description, the daily struggles of black Americans held captives under the slavery system are carefully (re) presented. Her exposition of white people's gross evil and wayward depravity in the novel has made her, like the authors of slave narratives, an eloquent and persuasive indictor of both the enslavers and the system drawn upon to justify the enslavement. The novel is indeed a large repository of testimony about the horror of becoming the legal property of another human being.

In a fictionalized form, the novel has revived victims of slavery, such as Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, Denver, Halle Suggs, Stamp Paid, and Beloved. To be true, they are not great heroic figures in history, but their existence proves to be true to African American history. It is important to note that there is no single or authorita-

tive voice in the novel. Morrison not only gives the leading character Sethe a voice; she also gives voices to other "minor" characters, such as Paul D, Ella, Sethe's mother, Sethe's surrogate mother Nan, Sixo's "Thirty-mile Woman" Patsy, Denver, and Beloved. Above all, she has vested the ancestor figure Baby Suggs with a holy and wise voice. Since almost all of these characters (Stamp Paid excepted) are illiterate, they cannot resort to writing to record their stories. What they have instead are black oral traditions, such as the tropes of storytelling, call and response, singing, dialogue, and oral recall. It is through exercising such ancient African properties that these children of Africa pass down their own stories.

As noted earlier, slaves had nothing but memory. A novel with slaves as characters, *Beloved* consists chiefly of their memories "loaded with the past" (*Beloved* 70). In "Memory, Creation, and Writing" Morrison points out that "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation" (385). Barbara Christian rightly notes that "Afro-American women writers rewrite the established history by embodying their ancestors' memory in fiction, and as well respond to previous Afro-American women's literature" (qtd. in Samuels and Hudson-Weens 98). Marilyn Sanders Mobley argues that in *Beloved* Morrison uses "memory as the metaphorical sign of the interior life to explore and represent dimensions of slave life that the classic slave narrative omitted" and thus she makes slavery "accessible to readers for whom slavery is not a memory, but a remote historical fact to be ignored, repressed or forgotten" (191).

Sethe's memory of the past focuses on her experiences in the Sweet Home plantation, Kentucky. The novel presents a telling story of her flight from as well as her fight against racial oppression and slavery bondage. Through the story of Sethe's life, Morrison passes on the "unspeakable" part of American history (*Beloved* 58); Sethe's past practically becomes a metaphor of the African American past. While recounting it to her daughters, Sethe discovers that "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost . . . the hurt was always there" (*Beloved* 58). Despite her efforts of "disremembering," of "beating back the past" (*Beloved* 73) , Sethe, cannot keep the painful past forever at bay.

As noted above, Sethe does not monopolize storytelling; other characters are also telling stories, sometimes telling the same story from different perspectives. The stories told in turn by Sethe, Paul D, Denver, Ella, Stamp Paid, and Baby Suggs, not only pass down the history of black slaves in and beyond the Sweet Home plantation but help explain the motivation behind Sethe's committing that horrible crime--killing her own daughter. Under the domonic system of slavery, slaves and their children are commodified. The children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers and the most important purpose of the slave woman is childbearing. Sethe was originally brought to Sweet Home to serve as a sexual mate to any of the Sweet Home men. She is valuable to Mr. Garner mainly

for her childbearing capabilities. As Helene Moglen points out, "The material project of slavery, as *Beloved* makes clear, is the commodification of the black body; the psychic result is that body's sexualization. . . . Sethe's worth, like the worth of all black women, is greater than a male laborer's because she is also, crucially, a breeder: herself property, she reproduces property in her children" (27). That is exactly why schoolteacher decides to capture her for reenslavement. In order not to subject her daughter to the fate of being a slave, Sethe kills her daughter.

Before the ghost of incarnated Beloved leaves, Sethe tries to convince her that "what she had done was right because it came from true love" (*Beloved* 251). She wants her to realize that under that hideous system,

> [A]nybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing — the part of her that was clean. (*Beloved* 251)

Under the slavery system, blacks are prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings and excluded from participation in civil and political soceity. While they are struggling to form their subjectivity, they are either denied of the opportunity or obstructed from doing it. As Abdul R. JanMohamed observes, "One of the most powerful weapons in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed; without control of the latter's mind the dominant culture can enforce compliance only through the constant use of brute force" (103-04). In *Beloved*, black slaves are not only deprived of basic freedom and educational opportunities but are living with constant fears--fears of abuses, oppression, beatings, rapes, and even lynching. Instances of white oppressors' use of brutal force against black slaves abound, and the following are some of the examples.

Sethe's mother, for instance, has been branded and later hanged because of her resistance to slavery. At the age of thirteen, Sethe comes to Sweet Home to replace Baby Suggs. Two years later she is married to Halle Suggs. With the death of Mr. Garner come his brother, schoolteacher, and his nephews. Besides constantly beating the male slaves, the unnamed schoolteacher--a physiognomist and phrenologist--treats slaves as creatures and keeps a record of their behavior, as a measure of his "scientific" experimentation. When Sethe learns of schoolteacher's evil intention to sell her children, she resolves to escape north to freedom. She and her husband make plans to take the underground railroad to Ohio. She successfully gets her children on board the northbound caravan. Before she can join them, however, she is taken for sport by schoolteacher's pupils who steal the milk she bears because of her

pregnancy with her fourth child. Recalled by Sethe, this primal scene of the novel centers on "two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (*Beloved* 70). She is brutally beaten for reporting this crime to Mrs. Garner, resulting in the chokecherry scars on her back. It is a scene that reduces her husband Halle, who watches it, to a figure of childish impotence, "squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as the clabber all over his face because the milk they took it on his mind" (*Beloved* 70), and it is the memory of this scene that motivates Sethe to kill her own daughter, because she does not want her to be schoolteacher's experiment which aims to demonstrate the animality of blacks.

Pregnant, barefoot, and mutilated, Sethe escapes to Ohio, to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and her children, including her "crawling-already?" baby girl. She arrives with her newly born child, Denver. While Sethe and her children finally flee to freedom, the men of the Sweet Home plantation fail in their attempts to escape. When Sixo is captured, he shows his resistance by grabbing the mouth of the gun and by singing and laughing. He sings and laughs while the white people are burning him. Later he is shot to death. When Paul D is caught, he is taken to be sold from Sweet Home, with his feet shackled, his neck collared, and his mouth tucked with a bit. After attempting to kill his new owner, he is sent to a slave camp in Alfred, Georgia, where he spends eighty-six days in shackles on a chain gang. Every day is a death (chain) dance to him, and at night he sleeps with other slaves in a wooden prison-his wooden tomb.

Ella is a key figure in the Cincinnati black community. At puberty, she had a horrible experience of being locked in a room by two white men-father and son — and of being constantly abused by them for a year. Those two whites, in her term, are "the lowest yet" (*Beloved* 256). In her judgment, nothing can be compared with these two whites- "A killing, a kidnap, a rape-- . . . Nothing compared to 'the lowest yet'" (*Beloved* 256). However, Ella is a very tough figure, for she "had been beaten every way but down" (*Beloved* 256). Her past experience has told her not to love anything; as she tells Sethe, "If anybody was to ask me I'd say, 'Don't love nothing' " (*Beloved* 92). Ella's "pragmatism" strikes a sharp contrast to Sethe's too-thick-love emotionalism.

Another key figure in the community is Stamp Paid, who discards the name Joshua given by the whites and renames himself. A ferryman who helps Sethe cross the Ohio River, Stamp Paid is "the sly, steely old black man: agent, fisherman, boatman, tracker, savior, spy" (*Beloved* 126). During his life, he--a history bearer--has witnessed many atrocities done by the whitefolks.

> Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children

> whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. (*Beloved* 180)

Among all the lynchings he has observed, the most unforgettable object is a red ribbon knotted around a girl's wet woolly hair which still clings to its bit of scalp. Stamp Paid's preoccupation with the ribbon leads him to ask, "What *are* these [white] people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?" (*Beloved* 180).

Stamp Paid is an African ancestor figure with uncanny ability. When he comes to visit Sethe at 124 Bluestone Road, he hears roaring voices from that house. He knows they are voices of those dead black people: "The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (*Beloved* 181). As Barbara Rigney insightfully observes, "Morrison fragments black history into symbols the color of blood: the choke-cherry scars on Sethe's back, Stamp Paid's piece of red ribbon, Paul D's loss of 'a red, red heart'. . . . Thus does Morrison bear historical witness and redeem her muted African mothers" (73).

Toward the end of *Beloved*, Stamp Paid listens to the indecipherable language that emanates from Sethe's house. He identifies the mumbling voices as those of nameless black and angry dead bemoaning the psychic alienation imposed upon them by whites, who in turn are overwhelmed by the jungle they plant in blacks:

> Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red rums ready for their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (*Beloved* 198-99)

Stamp Paid's reflections, showing blacks' attempt to negate white majority's hegemony, reveal a claim that Morrison makes in "City Limits" as well as in *Playing in the Dark*. By holding a mirror to reflect the negation back at the white racist hegemony, Morrison is negating the negation as a form of affirmation.

In Morrison's works, as Linda Krumholz points out, "morality is not preset in black and white categories of good and evil" (398). Morrison's dealing with the problem of racial oppression does not naively fall into the easy black-white dichotomy. Not all whites in *Beloved* are evil or depraved; some of them are presented as positive figures, for instance, Mr. Bodwin and Amy Denver. And even among the evil whites, there are lesser ones, such as Mr. and Mrs. Garner.

Morrison's depiction of the interracial relationships between Sethe and Amy Denver refutes Stanley Crouch's charge of her simplistic portrayal of good and evil. As the pregnant Sethe is escaping from slavery, she meets by chance the white girl Amy Denver, who not only lays healing hands upon Sethe's lashed back and swollen feet, but also attends at Denver's birth. It is not easy for Amy Denver to do this because that is a time when patrollers were rampant, and white people were generally hostile toward blacks. What drives Amy to help Sethe out are both the empathy arising out of her kind heart and the mutual trust and sisterly bond developed through their "yard chat" which transcends racial barriers.

Morrison's characterization of people, good or evil, is never simplistic, however. Small details betray that. For instance, in the household of the Bodwins, Denver observes on a shelf by the back door a racist painting, featuring a kneeling blackboy's mouth full of money with the words, "At Yo Service" (*Beloved* 255).

III

When he learns of the truth of Sethe's killing her own daughter, Paul D asks Stamp Paid, "How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?" When Stamp Paid answers, "All he can. All he can," Paul D asks, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" (*Beloved* 235). When Beloved comes back in flesh and blood form, she asks her mother the same question, "Why? Why? Why?" In every sense of the word, Beloved embodies whitefolks' victimization of black people in the U.S. Many critics have already pointed out that Beloved is more than the incarnated preverbal infant killed by her mother desperate to save her from slavery. Helene Moglen, for instance, writes, "[Beloved] is the haunting spirit of the baby daughter whom Sethe as a captured fugitive kills. . . . But Beloved is also more than this, and it is here that Morrison situates herself at the boundary of fantasy and realism: she is the representative of the 'sixty million and more' victims of slavery: of a collective tragedy which, as history, must be remembered and redeemed" (23). According to Ashraf Rushdy, Beloved is more than just a character in the novel. To Rushdy, she is "the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolizes what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly" (571). Jean Wyatt maintains that Beloved has a collective identity: "[S]he 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 epigraph" (474). Deborah Horvitz regards Beloved as a symbol of "every African woman whose story will never be told" (157) and connects her fate to that of "those African women who did not survive the Middle Passage," glossing "disremembered" as "meaning not only that they are forgotten, but also that they are dismembered, cut up

and off, and not remembered" (165). In Horvitz's words, "She is the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds--generations of mothers and daughters--hunted down and stolen from Africa; as such, she is, unlike mortals, invulnerable to barriers of time, space, and place" (157). In Mac G. Henderson's view, Beloved is both a psychological projection and a physical manifestation. Henderson holds that Morrison projects "the dead out into the earth" in the character of Beloved, and in her is mirrored Sethe and many more slave women in the novel (73).

Generally speaking, these critics, unlike Elizabeth House, regard Beloved as both a ghost and a symbol. Personally I agree with the claim that Beloved, besides being a ghost, also represents a collective identity of African slaves and I believe this is also what Morrison has in mind when she creates this character. In an interview with Walter Clemons, Morrison explained to him that "the figure ["Sixty Million and more"] is the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery--those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (Clemons 75). Morrison continued to report what she read, "one account describes the Congo as so clogged with bodies that the boat couldn't pass. . . . They packed 800 into a ship if they'd promised to deliver 400. They assumed that half would die. And half did." Morrison added, "A few people in my novel remember it" (Clemons 75). Beloved is exactly a character who remembers it.

In the novel, Beloved, coming back from the dead, is a story giver. In the body of a 19-year-old woman but with the mind of a two-year-old, Beloved herself is incapable of telling a complete story. She describes the world of the dead where she inhabits in the way a small child depicts reality without a logical sequence of events. Yet, in the form of monologue, Beloved not only reveals her possessive love for her mother but, significantly, 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 Africa and an unknown destination (see *Beloved* 210-13). The passage is to me one of Morrison's most stunning feats.

Beloved's memory of her experience on the slave ship connects her to a defining element of her ancestral history, the Middle Passage. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for a Widow*, Avey Johnson, during the crossing in the Middle Passage: "She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. . . . Their suffering--the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space--made hers of no consequence" (209). It is the memory of the Middle Passage that connects black women (such as Beloved and Avey Johnson) and all their ancestors on the slave ships in the Middle Passage.

IV

John Wideman has said, "What is history except people's imaginary recreation?" (qtd. in Rushdy 566). By writing black history into this great novel, Morrison has revisioned the past as it is filtered through the present. She has, successfully though paradoxically, revived the memory of the past in order to forget it; to unearth it in order to bury it. Beloved with a collective identity of those dead Aricans losing their lives in the Middle Passage has come back to reclaim their names and love. Now, she (as well as the dead Africans) is remembered and will not be lost.

It is important to note that by reviving such slave characters in African American history in her novel, Morrison has been revisioning a new history of black Americans. The picture of black history is no longer dominated by a certain number of heroic or prominent figures but is composed of a variety of common folks, forming a colorful mosaic. Characters such as Sethe (Margaret Garner), her nanny, her mother-in-law, her daughters, her comrades in the Sweet Home plantation, and her neighbors in Cincinnati, form a revisioned picture of American history.

Despite her vehement indictment of whites' inhumanity to blacks through the peculiar institution of slavery in this novel and despite her seeming brutal vision as appears in others, Morrison is basically a novelist who is deeply appreciative of life and who never loses hope for the future. As she once said, "What is curious to me," she once said, "is that bestial treatment of human beings never produces a race of beasts" (qtd. in Kakutani 24). Redemption always remains a possibility for her characters.

The ending of *Beloved* is rather significant if placed in the context of black cultural nationalism as conceived by Morrison. Denver's break out of self-enclosure on behalf of her family is bold and daring, symbolizing the need of joining the community. Beloved the angry ghost has already claimed her due. If Denver let her wrathful and insatiable sister-ghost continue tormenting her mother, the house would break up completely and no redemption is possible. It is significant that she walks out to solicit help not only from local black community but from good whites too. Eventually with the aid of thirty community women, Denver succeeds in exorcising Beloved/ghost away. In the meantime, Denver is going to work for the Bodwins.

The ending also promises a better future interracial relationships in the U.S. Morrison's arrangement seems to imply that even though American blacks have been under racial oppression for more than 300 years, blacks should not hold grudge against or embrace hatred toward the white world forever. It is necessary for American blacks to walk out of the ghost-haunting history and to collaborate with local community people. If my reading is correct, Morrison suggests that somewhere between Booker T. Washington's conservatism and W. E. B. DuBois's radicalism lies

a middle way. There must be a way out, which is neither too militant nor too conservative, neither too radical nor too accommodative. Viewed in terms of black cultural nationalism, that is exactly Morrison's position.

Morrison's revisioning of (black) history as examined above shows not merely her realization of the vital importance of history to black Americans but her special way of incorporating history into her works. Instead of shunning the nightmare of history, she bravely faces it and tries to pass on the lessons of the past for the historical present. Morrison's vision and revision of history reflect that she has, in a Foucaldian way, paid much attention to the gaps, ruptures, absences, or discontinuities in the process of historical change, which are often neglected or dismissed by traditional historians.[9] I think her appropriation of such historical figures as Margaret Garner and the 18-year-old Harlem girl in *Beloved* and *Jazz* respectively best attests to her revisionist view of history. Her writing of history into fiction has indeed rediscovered, reclaimed and reinvigorated a forgotten part of American history.

The Black Aesthetic critic Addison Gayle once urged black writers to model their literary characters upon such historical figures as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martian Delaney, H. Rap Brown, and Fannie Lou Hammer, because they offer images of "heroism, beauty, and courage" (44). With no intention to romanticize black American history, Morrison does not follow the Black Aestheticians' injunction when she decides to write history into fiction.[10] By writing black women as they really are and by paying particular attention to their emotions, their feelings, and their dilemmas, she has given voice, force and life to the silent "heroines" in black American history.

Morrison realizes that history is not merely a form of knowledge but a form of power. Her revisioning of the African American past is thus firmly grounded in the present, with a grave concern about the future of African Americans. The question that intrigues her is: "Can the black past shed light on the present of African Americans?" In her works, history does not manifest itself as an endless but empty nostalgia for the past. Her writing of history into her novels has in effect corrected "a romanticization of both the African past and the American past that has threatened to devalue 300 years of black life . . . as 'lived' experience" (Mobley 190). Moreover, Morrison's revisions of history, especially slavery, have filled in the huge gap that lies in the beginning of American history; to her that part of history, though unspeakable, should be remembered before it is forgotten.

Notes

[1] In her capacity as editor at Random House, Morrison was instrumental in compiling, editing and publishing *The Black Book*, and she also wrote two important essays -- "Behind the Making of *The Black Book*" and "Rediscovering Black History"--to introduce it to the public.

[2] Among the programmatic manifestations of black cultural nationalism are to develop a distinct African American literature and to construct a body of social-science literature written from the African American point of view in counter against the Eurocentered one (see Bracey, et al., xxvii). For studies of Morrison's connection with black cultural nationalism, see Reed and Chen.

[3] Not all critics consider *Beloved* Morrison's best. In one of the few strongly negative reviews of *Beloved*, Stanley Crouch labels the novel "a blackface holocaust novel . . . written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time of martyr ratings contests." He goes on to accuse Morrison of trying to "placate feminist ideology" while "appropriating the conventions of a holocaust tale." Morrison, he concludes, ignores the "ambiguities of the human soul" and opts for the simplistic portrayal of good and evil.

Nothing can be further from the truth. Morrison does explore humanity without evading the important questions of race, class and gender. I think Crouch's diatribes against Morrison clearly shows his new black conservatism, his anti-black feminism, and his negation of black cultural nationalism.

[4] It has been estimated that around nine million Africans were taken in slavery in the Americas. However, this figure does not include all the blacks uprooted from their homes. Millions died fighting in the wars to capture slaves, making the difficult trek to the coast where the slave ships waited, or undergoing the horrible passage across the Atlantic.

After the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison has told interviewers (such as Bonnie Angelo and Walter Clemons) that historians vary in their estimates of Africans who died because of the slavery system. As Morrison told Angelo, "Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million" (Angelo 48). In an interview with Clemons, Morrison brought to his attention *Beloved's* dedication, "Sixty Million and more," and explained that "the figure is the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery--those who died either as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (75).

The "middle passage" was the second or middle part of the triangular pattern

characteristic of the Atlantic trade--from Europe or New England to Africa, from Africa to the West Indies, from the West Indies to Europe or New England. After the West African slaves were chained together and loaded into the ships, the voyage began. It has been estimated that one of every eight slaves died on the "middle passage." The voyage, if weather was bad, sometimes lasted over three months. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), the author Equiano describes, among others, his experience of the "middle passage" from Africa to the West Indies. He recalled it as a horrifying example of man's inhumanity to his brothers.

[5] See, for instance, Mobley, Moglen, Rushdy, as well as Samuels and Hudson-Weems. According to Melissa Walker, "The story of Margaret Garner, the woman on whom Sethe's character is based, is told in Herbert Aptheker's 'The Negro Woman,' *Masses and Mainstream* 11 (February 1948), 11, and in Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 21. A facsimile of a newspaper account of a visit to Garner while she was in jail relating the details of the murder as Morrison presents them is included in Middleton Harris, et al., *The Black Book* (New York: Random House, 1974), 10. Morrison edited both Davis and Harris" (212).

[6] In a conversation with Naylor, Morrison explains that Beloved was inspired by the stories of two quite different women. One was the story of Margaret Garner; the other, that of an eighteen-year-old girl shot by a jealous lover. Morrison was interested in the "female form of love" that these two historical figures exemplified, suggesting to her as they did that "the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves" (585). According to my own reading, Morrison did not use the second story in *Beloved* but in *Jazz*.

[7] Extracts from a range of source material are reproduced in *Black Women in White American: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1972), including passages concerning the case of Margaret Garner on which Sethe's story is based (pp. 60-61). As Ferguson points out, despite the notoriety of the case, such acts of infanticide by slave mothers were not in fact uncommon (124).

[8] "We do not know exactly how many slaves escaped to freedom across the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon line, but one scholar . . . estimates the total at sixty thousand. Of this number, over one hundred wrote book-length 'slave narratives,' before the end of the Civil War," writes Henry Louis Gates ("Introduction" ix). According to Gates, between 1703 and 1944, 6006 exslaves had narrated the stories

of their captivity, through interviews, essays, and books. See Gates, "Introduction" ix.

For a study of *Beloved's* connection to slave narratives, see Bell.

[9] Michel Foucault's genealogy highlights discontinuities and fractures. He and Hayden White, among others, have argued that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past, and that history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies, a plural discourse which can always produce any number of alternative accounts (see Foucault and White). For discussions of Foucault's "counter-memory" and Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction," see Hutcheon (87-123) and Marshall (147-78). It is not the purpose of this essay, however, to demonstrate the influence of Foucault's concept of history on Morrison.

[10] Cf. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 210. On the issue of national culture, Fanon observes that the native intellectuals of the colonized people, facing the barbarity of today, often go back to the past and discover in the past dignity, glory, and solemnity of which they are proud of. They tend to discover "beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation, and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates" them (210).

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