The Politics of Genre in Beloved

MADHU DUBEY

Sherley Anne Williams, in the preface to her novel about slavery, *Dessa Rose*, writes that African-Americans have been “betrayed” by “literature and writing” (ix). Likewise, Toni Morrison has said that *her* novel of slavery, *Beloved*, is “outside most of the formal constricts of the novel” (qtd. in Gilroy, Small 181). In “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” Morrison writes that she refuses the credentials that literary references can bestow because these are inappropriate to the type of fiction she wishes to write—a fiction that is “not ... merely literary” but that imagines its ideal audience as “an illiterate or preliterate reader” (387). In this way, Williams and Morrison both disavow the literate and literary mode that forms each author’s chosen medium of expression.

This paradox, which forms the subject of my paper, seems all the more striking because each novelist has written a neo-slave narrative revisiting an era and a genre marked by immense faith in the emancipatory promise of print literacy. As Henry Louis Gates has observed, the nineteenth-century slave narratives constitute a body of literature “that was propelled by the Enlightenment demand that a ‘race’ place itself on the Great Chain of Being primarily through the exigencies of print” (“Introduction” v). If the slave narratives affirm the democratizing potential of print literacy, equating, to quote Gates again, “the rights of man with the ability to write” (xxix), much of the African-American literary tradition has been galvanized by the faith that literature can help press the case for full black participation in American democracy.¹

Revisiting the historical era of slavery, the neo-slave narrative loops back to the origins of the African-American literary tradition and reassesses, from a contemporary vantage point, the political promise of literacy that fueled this tradition. Through this recursive move, the neo-slave narrative participates in a widespread revaluation of the legacy of modernity, especially as this is ratified by the ideologies and institutions of print literacy. Novels such as *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* reconsider the dawning of the modern legacy from the perspective of a present moment when its political promise is widely felt to have been exhausted and betrayed. Their skepticism is signaled through a strong discomfort with their own literary modality.

Few African-American writers over the last two decades or so have been able to affirm “a direct correlation of political rights and *literacy*” or literature as a means of nourishing the ideals of American democracy (Gates, “Introduction”

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¹ On the vital links between literacy and political freedom in the early African-American literary tradition, see Andrews; Gates, *Signifying*, Chapter 4; Peterson; Stepto, *Behind*. This paper was first presented at the Midwest Faculty Seminar on *Beloved* held at the University of Chicago in October 1998. I would like to thank the participants in this seminar for their feedback, which shaped my revisions of the paper. I would also like to thank Giti Chandra, Kunle George, Priya Jaikumar, and Cyraina Johnson-Roullier for commenting on earlier versions of this paper and pushing me to clarify my argument.
Perhaps more than any other contemporary African-American writer, Toni Morrison has lent force to the recoil from literate and literary culture into folk models of racial community. This claim must appear absurd, given that Morrison is the most celebrated of contemporary black writers and her novel Beloved in particular, which I shall examine in detail, has become a canonized literary text. But my interest in this article is precisely to make sense of the paradoxical situation whereby one of the most prolific and acclaimed literary figures of our time is compelled to situate her work outside the bounds of literature and her ideal sphere of influence outside the domain of the literate public sphere (in which, I should add, Morrison actively participates through print interviews, journalistic essays, and edited anthologies on current public issues).

In her introductory essay to one such anthology, on the confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas's accession to the Supreme Court (titled "Friday on the Potomac"), Morrison offers an explanation for her suspicion of the public sphere within which literary works circulate. By virtue of publishing novels, a writer like Morrison perforce participates in the public sphere constituted by print literacy, yet she is leery of releasing her fiction into a sphere which has historically excluded or unevenly incorporated African-Americans. She observes in this essay that the "word 'public' itself" seems bankrupt, incapable of containing plural interests within a language of national unity (xii). But, she suggests, the situation of contemporary African-American writers is equally defined by the diminishing credibility of notions of unified racial community: the confirmation hearings should have made clear to even "the most reductionist intellect ... that the time for undiscriminating racial unity has passed" (xxx). Morrison does not, however, unreservedly welcome the passing of such an era because the contact between a supposedly multicultural national public and African-American culture does not follow a logic of free exchange. As she argues here, entry and assimilation into an unequally structured public sphere splinter racial community and are achieved at a steep cost. "[B]eing rescued into an adversarial culture can carry a huge debt," writes Morrison (xxvii), most importantly the loss or surrender of "the language of one's culture" (xxviii).

In a critical withdrawal from literate public culture, Morrison's fiction strains to constitute itself as anti-literature and to address a type of racial community that she herself recognizes to be unavailable to the novelist. If entry into the literate public sphere entails surrendering the "language of one's own culture," Morrison's novels strive to preserve this vernacular language, which, as I shall show, she believes is best sustained within the folk oral traditions compromised by entry into literary culture. This is why Morrison envisions her ideal audience as a "preliterate reader." And this is also why she claims that Beloved is outside most of the "formal constricts of the novel" and that the original sources of her fiction are drawn from African-American folk and oral traditions.

Morrison's emphatic disavowals of literature and the literate reader signal a disheartened retreat from the ideal of a democratic America. Paul Gilroy has noted Morrison's "consistent refusal to identify herself as an American. The 'I too sing America' option is not for her." Gilroy goes on to quote Morrison as saying: "My childhood efforts to join America were continually rebuffed. So I finally
said, 'you got it.' America has always meant something other to me—them. I was not fully participant in it” (qtd. in Gilroy, Small 179-80). As suggested by her argument in “Friday on the Potomac,” Morrison’s divestment from "America" is rooted in her sharp awareness of the continuing exclusion of large numbers of African-Americans from the public sphere as well as by the asymmetrical conditions of African-American assimilation into national politics and culture.

In the pages that follow, I will examine the ways in which Morrison’s disenchantment with the practice of American democracy (and more generally with the flawed and incompletely realized political promise of modernity) plays out at the level of novelistic form. I shall first briefly examine her much-quoted essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” published three years before Beloved, which offers an account of the political uses of the oralized novel as a genre that mediates the transition from folk racial community to modern public sphere. I shall show that Morrison’s conception of the political function of her fiction as well as of the oralized novel is riddled with contradictions that remain latent in “Rootedness” but become overt in Beloved. Turning then to a detailed reading of the novel, I will focus on the formal devices through which this most literary of literary texts struggles to present itself as something other or more than literature. I will argue that novelistic and oral sources are pitted against each other in Beloved, and I will also try to clarify the political claims that are staked in this generic conflict. Beloved is as much (if not more) a novel about the 1980s as it is about the 1860s and 1870s, and its vacillation between the polarized claims of racial community and modern public, orality and literacy, folk and novelistic traditions, is greatly revealing of the political dilemma confronted by contemporary African-American writers.

John Brenkman has argued that during the late 1970s and 1980s—a period of political uncertainty following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the previous two decades—African-American writers addressed in unusually heightened terms the problem of the relation between literature and vernacular culture, the writer and the masses. This problem of representation is endemic to “political modernity,” which pushes writers to overreach immediate vernacular communities and to address a generalized national public. But this dilemma of representation is exacerbated in the case of modern African-African literature, which must rearticulate communal cultural traditions “through communicative forms and public spheres not of its own making” (62). Brenkman argues that Toni Morrison’s fiction published during the late 1970s and 1980s vigorously grapples, at the level of “novelistic form itself,” with the tensions between “public and community, between vernacular and literary forms, between oral and written compositions,” and in the process seeks to specify the political usefulness (if any) of literature for the African-American people (63).

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), Morrison herself explicitly considers these problems of representation that confront African-American writers who aim to bridge the spheres of community and public, vernacular and literary cultures. “Rootedness” attempts to make a case for the political utility of the novel for African-Americans in transition to modernity. Morrison begins this essay by postulating a bygone “time when an artist could be genuinely represen-
tative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it" (339). In this traditional phase of folk culture, when artists belong to and speak for an organic racial community, the characteristic art forms are oral; Morrison specifically mentions storytelling, church shouts, and music as forms that allowed for a seamless fusion of individual and collective expression. With the transition from folk to modern culture, the individual artist is separated from an assured and given communal context, and problems of mediation and representation become the defining conditions for art. Morrison locates her own art of writing novels within a sphere she terms “public,” a modern sphere constituted by its distance from the organic racial community that folk artists could take for granted (339).

The genre of the novel acquires its political and historical significance as a means of managing the transition from communal to public, folk to modern culture. With modernization (which Morrison equates with urbanization in this essay, though elsewhere with slavery), oral traditions cease to be functional for the African-American community:

*For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours. … It is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before.*

(340)

The social effectivity of black music is compromised once its audience and sphere of influence expand beyond its racial community of origin, as a consequence of its commercial appropriation and national (and indeed international) circulation. The modernization of oral forms involves a simultaneous process of extension and dilution, as art moves beyond the arena of folk community to address a national public. The birth of the modern African-American novel is contingent on the loss—or at least the debilitation—of a racially specific oral tradition. It is at this moment that the novel must “work” for African-Americans, “must accomplish certain very strong functions” previously served by oral tradition, namely, to supply new information, to enlighten and counsel a people in transition, and to clarify (though not necessarily resolve) the “problems” and “conflicts” attending modernization (340-41).

Since the novel emerges at the historical moment when black art can no longer assume or address an organic racial community, how exactly can it replace the oral tradition, whose social function for the African-American community is vitiates once it ceases to be “exclusively” black? Morrison responds by displacing the problem from the sphere of circulation to the level of form. Although the novel cannot address the exclusively black audiences that formed the province of folk oral tradition, it can maintain a distinctively racial identity at a generic level, by appearing to salvage precisely those elements of folk community whose disappearance gives rise to the novel. Morrison identifies two such elements that distinguish black folk art: orality, which recreates a sense of community, and a blending of the supernatural and the real, which she considers to be indicative of
a uniquely “black cosmology.” Reviving these folk elements within her fiction, Morrison tries “to incorporate, into that traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is, in my view, Black” (342). Genre becomes an object of intense investment, for it must compensate for the absence of a clearly demarcated and legitimizing sphere of communal influence for the modern writer, and must guarantee the political purpose as well as the racial authenticity of the African-American novel.

Toward the end of “Rootedness,” Morrison affirms the political value of her fiction as follows: “If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it’s not about anything ... which is to say yes, the work must be political” (344). If we follow the argument of the essay as I have outlined it above, the political dimension of the African-American novel rests on a contradiction. The “you” whom Morrison addresses here is parallel to the “village” or the “community” that the novel cannot address, for the historical precondition for the emergence of the novel is the unavailability of organic community. But the modern novel is political to the extent that it can maintain a pre-modern frame of reference; it must mediate the transition to modernity by resuming exactly those categories that are superseded by the transition. The novel can be “about” the village or the organic community only insofar as it can restore these as fictive constructs that are historically inaccessible. By incorporating orality and the supernatural to modify “traditional genre,” the politically useful novel must paradoxically bury and resurrect the “tribe,” thereby formally compensating for the historical loss that occasions the novel in the first place.

Although “Rootedness” ostensibly makes a case for the political uses of the modern African-American novel, the essay displaces politics onto genre and directs it toward an irretrievable communal past. Morrison’s identification of her political arena of influence as the “village” bespeaks a critical unease with the literate public sphere that forms the novel’s frame of reference. In “Rootedness,” she does not explicitly acknowledge this contradiction between her purported defense of the political functions served by the modern novel and her displacement of these functions onto a pre-modern sphere. In fact, “Rootedness” suggests that the terms “novel” and “folk,” “public” and “village,” “modern” and “pre-modern” need not be formulated antithetically, for the oralized novel can effectively synthesize these terms and can remember and preserve a lost past at a generic level. In Beloved, however, genre does not contain the tension between these categories. Here, folk and novelistic registers are polarized against each other. Unlike “Rootedness,” where Morrison suggests that the novel can readily subsume folk elements and thereby guarantee its racial specificity and political value, in Beloved folk elements (embodied in Beloved herself, as I shall argue) are intended to disturb novelistic genre and to disorient the reader from the literate public sphere.

In his brief remarks on African-American neo-slave narratives, Gilroy observes that these texts display an ambivalence toward the form of the novel that conveys their suspicion of the modern legacy (Black 218). As I have mentioned, Morrison has sought to place Beloved outside “the formal constricts of the novel.”
In “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” she claims that the sources of her fiction are “not the traditional novelistic or readerly ones” but are instead derived from African-American oral culture (388). I should emphasize here that novelistic and oral folk traditions are not necessarily incommensurable. The novel has a long history of replenishing itself by incorporating and adapting folk and vernacular sources. Several novelistic genres (including the fantastic, gothic, and romance) have been hospitable to supernatural and magical elements. Morrison has said that she did not have “any literary precedent for what [she] was trying to do with the magic” in Beloved (qtd. in Caldwell 243), but there are literary parallels for the peculiar synthesis of realism and the supernatural achieved in the novel—notably in magical realism and in some strands of postmodern fiction, which routinely literalize supernatural and magical metaphors and symbols. When she claims that “traditional” or “orthodox” novelistic frames of reference cannot account for the unique narrative elements of Beloved, she implies that the dominant tradition of the novel has been realist, even though realism has formed but a brief interlude in the history of novelistic genre in the United States. In identifying supernatural and oral sources as anti-novelistic and equating novelistic tradition with realism, Morrison performs a critical gesture common to novelists who strive to represent cultural traditions that have been marginalized by dominant constructions of the American literary canon. The point of this gesture is to protect the “language of one’s culture”—the folk idiom that she fears will be lost or surrendered with the move from vernacular racial community to the literate public sphere.

It is primarily through Beloved’s literal return from the dead that Morrison seeks to open up a cluster of generic possibilities that she considers to be at odds with “traditional novelistic or readerly” expectations. We can read Beloved as symbolic of Sethe’s undigested past as well as of the “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for” spirits of the “sixty million and more” who died during the Middle Passage and to whom the novel is dedicated (274). Beloved symbolizes all this, but as her sister Denver says, “At times I think she was—more” (266). A symbolic reading of Beloved’s character does not exhaust all the interpretive possibilities entertained in the novel, some of which demand a literal reading—in other words, demand that readers believe that Beloved is neither a hallucination nor a ghost from the past nor a symbolic projection, but a flesh-and-blood incarnation. In order to believe that Beloved has actually returned from the dead, we must suspend conventional assumptions about mundane reality as well as narrative realism.

At a thematic as well as generic level, Beloved’s “miraculous resurrection” signals the novel’s disaffiliation from modern America and asserts an identifica-

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2 To some theorists of the novel, this is a defining feature of the genre. For example, see Bakhtin on the “enormous role” played by folk sources in the “formulation of novelistic discourse” (chapters 2 and 3).

3 Morrison does not wish to be aligned with the tradition of marvelous or magical realism; she objects to her fiction being labeled as such because, in her opinion, it implies that she does not “have a culture to write out of” (qtd. in Gilroy, Small 181). On the peculiar ontology of postmodern fiction, as well as on its literalization of tropes, see McHale.
tion with imagined African origins (105). Beloved’s return fulfills a diasporic desire for plenitude and connection that was both stimulated and blocked by the history of slavery. For the slave or the ex-slave in Beloved, history is a litany of loss and dislocation, and African origins are barely accessible through language. For example, Sethe’s effort to recall the African language of her ancestors demands nearly impossible efforts of symbolic interpretation: it’s like “picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood” (62). Given that genealogical and linguistic origins are only fragmentarily available to the slaves through strenuous acts of mediation, it is hardly surprising that Beloved’s fleshly return is so welcome to Sethe. What this return from the dead makes possible is a complete “join” between the past and the present that seems to undo the history of slavery (213).

Unmediated fusion with an African past is also accomplished at a generic level: the formal vehicles of Beloved’s literal return are orality and the supernatural, both of which are conceived by Morrison as “unorthodox novelistic characteristics” designed to render the novel uniquely “Black” (“Rootedness” 342). As suggested by frequent metaphorical overlaps between feeding and storytelling, various literal and figurative dimensions of orality converge in the character of Beloved, who hungers insatiably for bodily nourishment as well as for stories from the past, and whose presence also sates Sethe and Denver, transporting them to a “place beyond appetite” (119). Sethe’s visual recognition of her slave mother had been thwarted by the difficulty of decoding the inscription on her mutilated body; as if in compensation, the corporeal return of her daughter offers Sethe access to a spoken language carrying the surety of embodied presence. Beloved’s bodily presence also holds out the promise of an exact fit between the mother’s language and the daughter’s reality: as Beloved says, referring to Sethe, “I am where she told me” (213). The overlapping dimensions of the oral thus achieve a perfect identification between the generations, obliterating the breaks and discontinuities entailed by the history of slavery, and restoring an immediate and full presence: “All of it is now it is always now” (210).

Beloved’s bodily return exemplifies the blending of supernatural and real elements that Morrison considers to be distinctive of the oralized, “unorthodox,” and uniquely black novel (“Rootedness” 342). I will use the term “conjuring” as a shorthand for that dimension of the novel which requires readers to believe that the character Beloved has literally returned from the dead. Referring to the orally transmitted knowledge and practices of folk magic, medicine, and religion, the term “conjuring” is also used as a metaphor for the folk and oral sources of African-American women’s fiction. In a broader diasporic context as well, such as, for example, in the fiction of Caribbean writers Erna Brodber and Maryse Conde or the theories of diaspora literacy elaborated by Karla Holloway or Gay Wilentz, conjuring is intended to expose the limitations of modern rationality and to recover alternate folk ways of knowing suppressed by the Enlightenment legacy.

In the extensive critical discourse that now surrounds it, conjuring often serves to effect an identification with a primitivized Africa rather than with modern America, and thereby to posit the existence of a distinctive black diasporic cul-
tural tradition. Houston Baker, for example, in his study of black women novelists, *Workings of the Spirit*, describes conjuring as “a revered site of culturally specific interests and values” with “definable African antecedents” (99, 79). Morrison herself has explicitly written and talked about conjuring as a “way of knowing” unique to African-American folk culture, and as a means of disrupting traditional novelistic form (“Rootedness” 342). Although Morrison dislikes the use of the term “magic” because of its connotations of illiteracy and ignorance, she also insists that her novels draw on magic in order to attest to the existence of a specifically Afro-diasporic cosmology and epistemology (see Caldwell 243, McKay 153). She has flatly asserted in an interview that “Black people believe in magic. Once a woman asked me, ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ I said, ‘Yes. Do you believe in germs?’ It’s part of our heritage” (qtd. in Watkins 46). Magic in her novels, then, indexes an already given black cultural heritage and in this sense does not require literary justification or precedent.

To quote from one last interview, Morrison has said that in the black community she remembers from her childhood, magic supplied “an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems” (qtd. in Caldwell 226-27). Morrison does not specify and I am almost certainly putting her words to unintended uses in suggesting that magic provides an enormous resource for solving certain kinds of problems of modern literary representation. The presence of magic in Morrison’s novels animates a pre- and anti-modern form of knowledge grounded in faith rather than reason and testifies to a shared structure of communal beliefs. By presupposing collective systems of belief that are deemed to be defining of African-American folk community, Morrison’s fiction fosters the impression of addressing a distinct racial community. If the writer can assume communal belief in magic, readers would be expected to read magic as literally true rather than as a literary device.

This is precisely the case in *Beloved*, which urges a literal as well as symbolic reading of the supernatural. Beloved’s literal return is meant to affiliate us with black folk modes of knowing and to detach us from the literary frame of reference that Morrison repeatedly renounces in essays and interviews. Taking their cue from Morrison’s authorial comments on her fiction, several of her readers who have tried to identify what is racially distinctive in her fiction have argued that it follows a folk storytelling tradition originating in Africa, and that this tradition challenges modern Western epistemologies, attesting to an alternate African view of reality (Wilentz 96-98). If read in the context of the folk storytelling tradition, Beloved’s return would presumably not appear extraordinary or

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4 For accounts of the folk, oral, and African sources of conjuring, see Holloway, *Moorings and Metaphors*; Joyce; Pryse. In its evocation of a premodern Africa as its generic origin, Morrison’s novel contributes to what Paul Gilroy has termed a “counterculture of modernity,” developed by Afro-diasporic writers and artists in critical reaction against the mutually constitutive histories of modernity and slavery (Black 36). Orality and the supernatural are formal devices crucial to Morrison’s elaboration of a counterculture of modernity in *Beloved*, in that these devices make possible an imaginary release from historical time and an unmediated recovery of African cultural origins in the present of U.S. slavery.

5 Also see Christian’s argument that *Beloved* is most fruitfully “approached from an African cosmological perspective” (11).
arouse any cognitive dissonance because, as Morrison claims in “Rootedness,” supernatural and real elements blend seamlessly within this folk tradition.

The novel’s attempted affiliation with a folk rather than a literary tradition is also evident from the fact that Beloved’s resurrection flouts the realist imperative that has been placed on the African-American literary tradition since its inception in the slave narratives. Morrison has remarked that the documentary realism of the slave narratives imposed complete silence about those “excessive” proceedings of slavery that were “too terrible to relate” (“Site” 301). Beloved is an attempt to “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left,” and to render all that could not be known or represented within the terms of Enlightenment rationality (303). The resurrection of the murdered and buried Beloved is calculated to evoke the unreason and the violence that form the underside of modern humanism. These repressed but constitutive dimensions of the modern legacy are manifested in Beloved as a generic excess that destabilizes the reasonable, literate discourse of the slave narratives. Morrison cannot endorse the slave narratives’ immense faith in the politically emancipatory potential of print literacy, in part because print literacy was so thoroughly implicated in the definitions of humanity, reason, and culture that bolstered the institution of slavery. “Modern life begins with slavery,” Morrison has said to Gilroy, so the legacy of print modernity has been corrupt and contradictory from the very start, complicitous in the dehumanization of African-Americans, as Beloved forcefully instantiates (qtd. in Small 178).

Like the nineteenth-century slave narratives, Beloved relentlessly exposes the inconsistencies and brutalities of modern humanism, but the novel refuses the assumption, central to the slave narratives, that print literacy is the most effective means of demonstrating the humanity of the slave. One of the gaps that Morrison noticed in her reading of the slave narratives was that they made no mention of the “interior life” of the slaves (“Site” 302). In order to assume the authority of verisimilitude and to establish the objective and representative nature of their denunciations of slavery, the authors of slave narratives had to suppress elements of their own experience of slavery that might appear too subjective. The slave narrative’s claim to representative status was, of course, tied up with the pragmatic political ambition of these narratives, which was to urge the abolition of slavery and to gain access to modern political rights of citizenship, for which print literacy was a prerequisite.

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6 I should clarify here that Morrison’s own critique of literacy is launched from the perspective of the late-twentieth century, and by no means implies a critique of the slave narratives for their emphasis on literacy. In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison explicitly states that for her, “a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century ... the exercise is very different” from what it was for the authors of slave narratives (302). Morrison acknowledges that, given the political climate in which they wrote—the “Age of Enlightenment” and the “Age of Scientific Racism”—authors of slave narratives had to demonstrate their proficiency in reading and writing in order to establish their humanity and press for the abolition of slavery (301).

7 In her discussion of the slave narratives in “The Site of Memory,” Morrison points out the crucial link between literacy and political rights for the authors of slave narratives: “These writers knew that literacy was power. Voting, after all, was inextricably connected to the ability to read; literacy was a way of assuming and proving the ‘humanity’ that the Constitution denied them” (301).
Beloved distances itself from the aspirations for political representation advanced in the slave narratives, seeking instead to affirm a subjective African-American humanity as well as cultural community through forms of folk expression that are explicitly imagined outside the terms of the literate public sphere. That literate culture fosters dehumanizing perceptions of African-Americans is made clear in the novel from Schoolteacher’s listing of Sethe’s animal and human characteristics in his manuscript about slavery, and from the newspaper reports that present Sethe’s infanticide as monstrous and bestial. If, for authors of slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass, literacy was the gateway to freedom, Sethe defines freedom as “[n]o notebook for my babies” (198), and the male slaves at Sweet Home refuse their master’s unusual offer of literacy because “nothing important to them could be put down on paper” (125).

Beloved invests transforming and humanizing possibilities in oral and performative rather than literate and literary modes of expression. We are told that when the slaves sang and danced, they “shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other” (31). Baby Suggs summons these possibilities through her sermon in the Clearing, as she exhorts the slaves to sing and dance, to perform their newfound freedom by reclaiming their bodies and spirits. Baby Suggs’s sermon is a performative event that uses sound and movement to conjure a utopian community into being. To echo the novel’s epigraph, the sermon verbally constitutes a people into a community and calls them beloved. But the power of Baby Suggs’s oral and kinetic imagination is finally disabled by the more material power of the law. As long as the Fugitive Slave Law remains in effect and escaped slaves can be remanded to chattel status, Baby Suggs’s vision of a liberated and humanized community can only remain a utopian possibility. The very fact that the Fugitive Slave Law is what sets off the chain of events leading up to Sethe’s infanticide demonstrates that changes at the legal and political levels are preconditions for the material realization of the beloved community.

Even during the subsequent historical period in which Beloved’s return takes place, a period following the legal abolition of slavery, material conditions for African-Americans are scarcely better than they were under slavery: “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.” After cataloguing the various forms of violence inflicted on the bodies of black men, women, and children during this era, the narrator observes that this violence “[s]tank up off the pages of the North Star, out of the mouths of witnesses, etched in crooked handwriting in letters delivered by hand. Detailed in documents and petitions full of whereas and presented to any legal body who’d read it” (180). This passage makes clear that during the post-emancipation period in which much of the novel is set, the struggle for political justice and freedom was actively being waged in print as well as in the courts.

Although it alludes to this struggle, the novel is committed to grasping a different kind of freedom defined in personal, affective, and familial terms: “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom” (162). In a recent book, Angela Davis traces
the changing ideals of freedom that were voiced in African-American oral forms before and after emancipation. Davis argues that oral forms that developed during the slave era, such as the spirituals and the work songs, expressed "quintessentially collective ... aspirations for worldly freedom," in particular for freedom from slavery (4-5). Musical forms such as the blues that emerged out of the "vast disappointment that followed emancipation—when economic and political liberation must have seemed more unattainable than ever—[and] represented freedom in more immediate and accessible terms" (7). Since the likelihood of actualizing economic and political ideals of freedom must have seemed remote to African-Americans in the immediate aftermath of slavery, it is not surprising, Davis suggests, that post-emancipation musical forms emphasized those subjective and sexual dimensions of freedom that seemed more firmly within reach (10).

Like the blues, Beloved too seems to be born out of a "vast disappointment" with the possibility of attaining freedom in the political and public spheres. And this is why the novel represents freedom as the ability to choose whom to love, to reclaim bodily plenitude and pleasure, and to reconstitute familial structures. Given this conception of freedom, it makes perfect sense that Sethe's first step toward overcoming the history of slavery is initiated when her lost daughter is restored to her in the flesh. This restoration occurs in an oral, magical register that is meant to confound "traditional novelistic or readerly" expectations. As I have argued, Beloved's incarnation achieves a perfect "join" between past and present that is precluded not only by historical reality but also by the generic constraints of the realist novel. One of the ways in which Beloved's literal return activates an oral (and anti-writerly) possibility is that it undoes death and gratifies a hunger for full presence, whereas writing is necessarily a record of absence, always bearing, in Walter Ong's phrase, "an aura of accomplished death" (233).

But the history of the Middle Passage, including the deaths of sixty million and more, cannot be undone, and unmediated recovery of folk traditions putatively rooted in Africa is impossible. Moreover, Beloved is after all a novel and not a folk performance, and as such it overwrites its own desire for folk origins with a decidedly novelistic conclusion. The immediacy and plenitude of the oral and magical registers cannot form the basis of the novel's resolution, and must be represented as impossible before the novel can reach closure. Beloved must be buried again, and the desire for her literal presence placed under erasure, turned into a story that cannot be passed on. At the end, we are left with merely the written trace of an absence, with the last word of the novel—"Beloved"—commemorating what cannot be made literally real. With the restoration of a novelistic modality at its close, Beloved's fantasy of fusion with an African folk origin is displaced by the difficult work of historical mediation and representation. That this resolution is meant to restore us to mundane, historical time and to override the oral and magical dimensions is clear from the fact that the ending of Beloved achieves the goals typical of the realist novel—the heterosexual union of Sethe and Paul D., the consolidation of the familial unit of father, mother, and daughter, and the reintegration of Sethe with the social world—all three of which were put at risk by Beloved's appearance.
Appropriately enough, this resolution hinges on the displacement of Beloved, the orally desirous daughter, by Denver, the literate daughter. Most readers would not endorse this interpretation of the novel’s conclusion. Critics tend to regard Denver as an embodiment of the attentive listener more than the literate daughter, taking their cue from Robert Stepto’s distinction between readers and listeners as well as from Henry Louis Gates’s notion of the “speakerly text.” Stepto, whose influential study, *From Behind the Veil*, had emphasized the link between literacy and freedom vital to the early African-American narrative tradition, argued in a later essay that suspicion of literacy has been as central to shaping black narrative as has belief in literacy’s promise. In “Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives,” Stepto contends that many African-American novels present themselves as oral storytelling performances—a gesture that conveys the authors’ distrust of the American reader, of the racial protocols that govern the reading of literary texts, and of “official literate culture” in general (309). According to Stepto, novels that draw on storytelling traditions constitute their ideal audiences as listeners rather than readers. The competency of each listener inheres in his or her ability to provide an authenticating response to the tale as well as to the communal context from which the tale is drawn (308). Gates presents a parallel and even more influential argument through his concept of the “speakerly text,” or the text whose rhetorical strategies are designed to create the “illusion of oral narration,” again with the aim of affirming a uniquely black vernacular speech community (*Signifying* 181).

Following Gates and Stepto, readers of *Beloved* tend to construe it as a speakerly rather than readerly text. Ashraf Rushdy, for example, argues that the novel “situates itself not only theoretically, but also performatively, as an oral literature,” and that it personifies its ideal listener in the character of Denver (587). According to Rushdy, the story of *Beloved* “does get passed on ... through the ear,” and it gets passed on because “Denver is *listening*” and progressively learning how to hear Sethe’s tale of infanticide with compassion and understanding (585). Through Denver, the novel tries to school the reader into becoming an authenticator of Sethe’s story, so that we, unlike Paul D., cannot endorse Schoolteacher’s writing up of Sethe as a species with four legs rather than two.

Accounts of *Beloved* as a speakerly text and of Denver as the model of the ideal listener are attentive to the novel’s powerful oral drive. And, of course, Robert Stepto’s argument about the African-American novelist’s distrust of literacy and the protocols of American readership is explicitly confirmed by Morrison herself, who has said that she wants her audience to “respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate reader would” (“Memory” 387). But *Beloved* treats issues of reading and listening, literacy and orality, in a far more contradictory and irresolute manner than is suggested by readings of the novel as a speakerly text. It is true that Denver must accredit and identify with Sethe’s stories, and in this way live up to the authenticating role of the ideal listener. But the daughter’s validation of the mother’s stories can also become stultifying for both, as is evident from Beloved’s vampiric hunger for Sethe’s stories. Some of the sequences to-

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8 For accounts that align *Beloved* with an oral rather than literary tradition, see Holloway, Mobley, Sale.
ward the end of the novel that render in charged, poetic prose the intimate lan-
guage that fuses the mother and the daughters also suggest the dystopian possi-
bilities of Marjorie Pryse’s image (adapted from Zora Neale Hurston) of perfect
identification between speakers and listeners, mothers and daughters—
“speaking with each others’ tongues in our mouths” (22)—a metaphor of un-
mediated oral communication that is also an image of literal suffocation.9

Denver has to dissociate herself from the incestuous oral discourse of her
mother and sister before the novel can find its resolution. Denver’s movement
out of the oral imaginary is aided by literacy: the trail that takes her out into the
wider public is “made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of
others” (248). Following her father’s conviction that “If you can’t read they can
beat you” (208), at the end of the novel Denver is educating herself in “book
stuff” in preparation for her possible departure to Oberlin (272). This ending of
the novel, which is also the beginning of Denver’s story, decidedly recalls that
epitome of realist fiction, the bildungsroman, or the novel of development, in
which the protagonist’s process of individuation entails departure from home
and family and acquisition of public values through an education in literacy.

Thus far, I have traced the elements of narrative realism, conjoined with hope
in literacy, on which the resolution of Beloved hinges. But although the form of
the realist novel does in some respects win out in the end, displacing the oral and
magical elements embodied in Beloved, this is not the end of the story. If
Denver’s literacy and entry into the public sphere represent the promise of the
future, at the same time the novel also enacts a strong counter-impulse, investing
hopes of communal redemption in forms of oral expression that are presented in
stark opposition to the literate, modern public sphere.

The hope offered by the novel’s resolution rests not only on Denver’s literacy
but also on the community of women that collects outside 124 Bluestone Road
and preempts Sethe’s impulse to repeat the past. In this scene, the women per-
form an exorcism of the monstrous past through the medium of sacral, wordless
sound. They begin by praying, and then take “a step back to the beginning. In the
beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all
knew what that sound sounded like” (259). Their voices “searched for the right
combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words,” and
they find it in a sublime vocal expression of pure sound without any verbal con-
tent (261). This scene affirms a pre- or extra-discursive community whose re-
demptive potential cannot be represented in language—hardly a surprising
move, given the novel’s delineation of a world in which language is an instru-
ment of violence, a world in which “words could be spoken that would close
your ears shut” (243).

The novel’s affirmation of a sonic sublime interrupts and derails its parallel
drive toward literacy and narrative realism. Although the anti-realist, magical,
and oral possibilities embodied in Beloved are expelled by the end of the novel,
these are partially reinstated by the women’s community. At a thematic level, the
closing image of community is presented as a corrective to the dystopian orality
embodied in Beloved: if Beloved represents the dangers of unmediated commu-

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9 See Gallop’s unraveling of the disturbing (and gagging) implications of this metaphor (154-76).
union with the past, the women’s community undertakes the task of intervening between Sethe and her past. But despite this thematic distinction, there is an underlying affinity between the generic registers—of magical and sublime expression—evoked by Beloved and the women’s community. Both convey a desire to recover the fullness of oral origins as well as a strong unease with novelistic claims to representation. The sonic community of women exceeds the novel’s movement toward a realist resolution and pushes at the limits of novelistic expression.

It is not surprising that music forms the medium of the one redemptive community presented in Beloved. In “Rootedness” music is the art form that was “healing” for the African-American community, whereas the novel emerges at the point of transition from racial community to modern public. In a sense, the sublime sonic community in Beloved is a product of nostalgic longing for a premodern era of sacred, full expression and meaning. As a form of reaction to the “withdrawal of the real” that marks the shift to modernity (Lyotard, Postmodern 79), the sublime pursues “the sacred by other means” (Roberts 173), emphasizing as it does the inadequacies of modern aesthetic representation, but also affirming the awesome power of the imagination to conceive what it cannot represent. Music lends itself especially well to this sublime purpose: unique among the arts as a non-representational form, music can achieve a certain immediacy of expression and can thereby appear to transcend the limitations of other forms of artistic expression.

“Rootedness” suggests that the modern novel can recover this immediacy and wholeness of meaning by generically incorporating elements (such as the impression of orality or the blending of supernatural and real) that recall a premodern era. Beloved, however, shows us that a premodern sense of the sacred as well as plenitude of expression can only be manifested as the absent contents of the modern novel. Music becomes sublime—in other words, forces attention to the lack at the heart of modern representation—only as it is novelized. Through its image of sonic community, Beloved aspires toward the transcendent condition of music. But the sonic community is a novelistic image that alludes to a plenitude of expression it can never attain. Music is contained within the novel but signifies what is more than the novel, and it is in this sense that the sonic community may be apprehended as sublime, intimating what is unrepresentable except as a gap or disturbance within the novel.

The political implications of the sublime in Beloved may be more clearly appreciated with reference to Gilroy’s distinction between the politics of fulfillment and the politics of transfiguration. In The Black Atlantic, he argues that the politics of fulfillment operates within a discursive mode, immanent within the modern public sphere, and is fueled by the demand that democratic society live up to its own rhetoric. The politics of transfiguration, in contrast, is a utopian mode that cannot rely on discursive language to communicate its “unsayable claims to truth” (37). Using the term “slave sublime” to describe the unrepresentable desires that drive a politics of transfiguration, he contends that this politics is best exemplified by Afro-diasporic performative and musical forms. These forms,
according to Gilroy, make up a counter-cultural sphere, exposing the internal fissures and contradictions in discourses of modern democracy (37-38).

Although he considers music exemplary of the politics of transfiguration, since it is freighted with political desires that cannot be represented within the language of modernity, elsewhere Gilroy blunts his argument by filling Afro-diasporic music with a specific and modern political content. For example, he suggests that the antiphonal (call-and-response) structure of this music yields a powerful metaphor for democracy (200). In *Beloved*, music does not bear any modern political content, but works according to the more strictly sublime logic of Gilroy's politics of transfiguration. The musical sublime in the novel serves as a repository for all that eludes the dominion of Enlightenment rationality, contributing to the political critique of modernity that explicitly motivates some recent versions of the sublime. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example, calls for a renewed commitment to a sublime aesthetic that accentuates the inadequacies and limitations of representation rather than the yearning for fullness. Lyotard's sublime is calculated to discredit the Enlightenment faith in reason as a faculty that can grasp the world in its totality and legitimize political meta-narratives.11

In a biting critique of recent (what he terms "postmodern") theories of the sublime, Dick Hebdige has argued that these theories stress the primacy of aesthetic experience and evacuate the aesthetic of any political intents or effects. Taking Lyotard's notion of the sublime as exemplary of this trend, Hebdige concedes that Lyotard's emphasis on the unrepresentable is "politically nuanced" insofar as it militates against the terroristic and totalitarian potentialities of Enlightenment reason. But, Hebdige goes on to argue, Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime precludes all political possibilities in its effort to guard against the dangers of political modernity. For Lyotard, the sublime must remain "the prerogative of art alone: the socio-political aspiration to 'present the unrepresentable,' to embody in the here and now the that-which-is-to-be, is deemed untenable" (65). Emphasizing the limits of language as a medium of human communication, Lyotard's sublime effects a wholesale retreat from sociality itself and from any project to define and actualize collective interests and values. Insistence on what is impossible within language tends "to seriously limit the scope and definition of the political (where politics is defined as the 'art of the possible')" (68).

Hebdige may be right in arguing that, insofar as a sublime aesthetic places the emphasis on the failures rather than the unfulfilled possibilities of representation, on present lack rather than future fullness, it forecloses political possibilities. But *Beloved* illustrates that the aesthetic and political dimensions of the sublime need not be locked in an inverse relation, whereby the aesthetic accues value from a foreclosure of political possibilities. The sublime in Morrison's novel suggests that aesthetic as well as political potential is blocked in the present. Contrary to Lyotard's conception of the sublime, the sonic sublime in *Beloved* summons a particular form of sociality—a pre-modern racial community. Even though it ex-

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10 Werner offers a parallel argument about the political implications of the call-and-response structure of African and African-American musical forms (xviii).

11 For Lyotard on the sublime, see Postmodern 77-82, and "Complexity and the Sublime" 23-24.
ceeds language, Morrison’s sublime bears collective aspirations that are rooted in the past, and in this sense, it arouses nostalgia for what is lost to modernity. But at a generic level, the musical sublime in Beloved works as a mode of critique as much as nostalgia, in that it animates possibilities that can only be evoked as a surplus or an absence within the available means of representation. Predicated on “the paradox of the presence of absence,” the sublime evokes an excess of desire or potential that cannot be given shape in the present (Roberts 173). Inducing an uneasy recognition of what is lacking in the present, the aesthetic of the sublime obliquely reveals the constraints of contemporaneous political realities and choices: “A formal rather than substantive commitment to something inexpressible allows that there be, at every moment, a horizon of differences or alternatives that cannot, under the current conditions of our practices, be expressed now” (Goehr 45). In Beloved, the sublime aesthetic of the inexpressible does not straightforwardly compensate for what is lacking in the political present, but it does offer a means of sustaining currently unrepresentable but urgently desired political possibilities.

The sonic sublime in Beloved carries collective racial aspirations that cannot be represented under the conditions of contemporary political or aesthetic practices. We know from “Rootedness” that Morrison wishes to exercise a collective political power through her fiction and claims that this power inheres in the novel’s ability to restore racial community at an aesthetic level. Beloved reveals that the novel cannot lay claim to political power so defined, for it cannot recover a by-gone time when the artist could be “genuinely representative of the tribe.” The racial community that cannot be given political form is also impossible to realize at an aesthetic level, as is clear from the fact that Beloved can only manifest racial community as an “impossible object” of desire. The “tribe” has been dispersed as a consequence of its partial incorporation into national public culture, but Morrison wants to maintain some notion of collective African-American interests precisely because participation in national politics and culture is still overdetermined by race.

Beloved registers intense disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of American democracy and conveys the difficulty of giving form to an African-American political collectivity in the present. The novel’s generic tensions clarify the narrow space it occupies, between notions of unified racial community, which it longs for but cannot revive, and the literate public sphere, in which it must participate but at the cost of compromising its ambition to represent black community. It is greatly telling of the moment in which Beloved was written that it vests its political hopes in forms of expression that are unavailable to the contemporary novelist and, by virtue of being linguistically inexpressible, are situated outside the bounds of the modern public sphere. The sublime, oral, and magical modes in Morrison’s novel indirectly index the political dilemma confronted by African-American writers in the post-Civil Rights and Black Power decades, when, as Morrison has remarked, the very word “public” seems bankrupt and “undiscriminating racial unity” seems obsolete. In this era, collec-
tive racial aspirations tend to move beyond the realm of political representation and to assume the sublime or magical forms they take in *Beloved*.

Pessimism about contemporary political prospects is what marks *Beloved* as a 1980s novel, and is by no means unique to Morrison. *Beloved* takes as its historical setting the decades, immediately preceding and following emancipation, which scholars often deem critical to the development of a black “counterpublic” sphere. Emerging in response to the exclusion of African-Americans from the dominant public sphere and reinforced by racial segregation, the black counterpublic sphere is said to be distinguished by its reliance on vernacular cultural practices rather than on print literacy, its strong investment in a politicized notion of racial community, and its simultaneous critique and extension of the practices of American democracy. Contemporary narratives about the trajectory of this counterpublic sphere broadly agree that it reached its optimal level of expansion and politicization during the Civil Rights and Black Power decades, and has subsequently entered a phase of dramatic decline (Dawson 204-05; Gregory 160-61; Holt 326-27). For a variety of economic, political, and social reasons, the idea of a cohesive set of African-American political interests—the idea that sponsored and sustained the black counterpublic sphere—seems anachronistic to many African-American intellectuals in the decades following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. A widespread sense of the uncertain political purchase of ideas of racial community is seismically registered in African-American literary studies, as writers and critics strain to revive the aesthetic ethos of the 1960s and early 1970s, when a vernacular black art legitimized itself on the claim of its political efficacy for a wider and clearly definable racial community. These are precisely the claims that Morrison both resurrects and reluctantly buries in *Beloved*. The generic conflicts of the novel convey the continuing sway as well as the shrinking credibility of these claims in the late twentieth century.

**Works Cited**


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13 On the distinctive properties of the black counterpublic sphere, see the Black Public Sphere Collective, “Preface” (2-3); Brown (119); Dawson (206). On the term “counterpublic,” see Fraser (122-25).

14 Dawson, drawing on Morrison from “Friday on the Potomac,” argues that the concept of a unified black political collectivity appears to be a “historical anachronism,” and offers a largely persuasive account of the economic, political, and social factors responsible for the decline of the black counterpublic sphere since the 1970s (199).


*Dawson, Michael C. “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics.” Black Public 199-228.*


*Gregory, Steven. “Race, Identity and Political Activism: The Shifting Contours of the African American Public Sphere.” Black Public 151-68.*


