

Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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"Most artful Teuth, [you], being the father of written letters, have on account of goodwill said the opposite of what they can do. For this will provide forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through neglect of memory, seeing that, through trust in writing, they recollect from outside with alien markings, not reminding themselves from inside, by themselves. You have therefore found a drug not for memory, but for reminding."

Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a

I

The suspicion that writing might be an ally not of memory, but of forgetfulness, is perhaps as old as writing itself—at least, that is what the words of divine King Thamos to his subaltern are designed to suggest, thus underscoring one of Plato's principal concerns in the *Phaedrus*.¹ Writing, he has Socrates tell his pupil, is dangerous, as it leads people to mistake the written representation of knowledge for knowledge itself. Instead of teaching them truth, it merely teaches them true opinions, and so truth will fall into oblivion. In the *Phaedrus*, this distrust of writing gives rise to the dream of a different kind of writing, "one that is written with knowledge in the soul of him who understands, with power to defend itself, and knowing to speak and to keep silence towards those it ought [...], a speech living and endowed with soul" (276a). This would be, in effect, a written *logos* with the ability not only to convey the originary presence of its "father" but also to establish a community of those who share the

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truth which this presence imparts. The form in which Plato strove to realize this dream is that of a *simulated* orality—namely, that of the dialogues themselves, which, if approached in the right spirit, are supposed to restore for the reader the presence of his teacher Socrates.

In the past few decades, this very old anxiety has assumed both a new form and a new kind of urgency, as writers and critics have begun to question if and how the human catastrophes which have shaped modern history could properly be represented and remembered. The French director Claude Lanzmann expressed this anxiety in its most radical form when he argued that “to learn the Holocaust” is effectively to “forget” it (85). Of course, Lanzmann is primarily concerned with the medium of film, but much the same has been argued for written accounts of the Holocaust, most notably by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. According to this school of thought, it can never be enough to know ‘about’ the horror of genocide. As Walter Benn Michaels summarizes the argument, “what the Holocaust requires is a way of transmitting not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (141).² Texts which deal with such traumatic historical events must therefore strive not merely to render them in a factually accurate fashion, but rather to *reenact* them for the reader in order to implicate him in the traumatic experience, and to evoke the lost presence of the victims. Theories of trauma have, over the past decades, become one of the principal tools for conceptualizing not only the Holocaust, but the historical experience of victimized minority groups in general, and for outlining the ethical responsibilities of both writers and critics with respect to the latter.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* has frequently been approached from such an angle—it is, after all, a work which announces its ambition to commemorate one of the constitutive historical traumas of American culture already in the famous epigraph: “*Sixty Million and More*” (xi)—the number of Africans who are estimated to have died during the Middle Passage, before even reaching the shores of America. In this reading of *Beloved*, I will triangulate such a take on the novel with some ideas from

scholarship on the split between orality and literacy, as well as with Toni Morrison's own essays on the poetics of Afro-American art. In the latter, Morrison typically conceives of the relation between reader and text on the model of oral communication, arguing that something like the antiphony characteristic of Afro-American musical forms or the call-and-response interaction between a preacher and his congregation can also take place in reading—indeed, that the achievement of such an interaction between reader and text ought to be the principal measure of a text's literary value. Insofar as it successfully simulates oral interaction ("reminding" the reader, as it were, "from inside"), literature is a catalyst in the reproduction of a community and helps to preserve its identity.

Beloved is clearly informed by these ideas: it is full of descriptions of communal story-telling, call-and-response preaching and choir singing. It is these 'oral' interactions which help the victims of slavery, as they are depicted in the novel, to remember their past and thereby to 're-member,' to heal, both themselves and their fractured community. Many readings of the novel haven taken over, to a greater or lesser extent, these basic assumptions: they see the text as drawing readers into a shared experience not only with the cast of the novel, but with the historical victims of slavery, thus rescuing the latter from the willful oblivion of what Morrison herself has diagnosed as a "national amnesia" ("The Pain of Being Black" 257); by recovering and "working through" traumatic aspects of the national past which have been violently repressed (LaCapra 89), the novel enacts a communal healing process.

What such readings usually lose sight of, however, is that this act of remembrance—like all such acts—is necessarily founded on a simultaneous act of 'dis-membering.' All the models for the functioning of the healing process which Morrison offers her readers (both in *Beloved* and in her poetological essays) are drawn from oral discourse. In order for the reader to remember slavery in the way that the novel seems to call for, he must therefore suspend his awareness of the fact that *Beloved* is neither a communal song nor the living partner in a

dialogue, but a printed text. In order for the characters of the novel to heal, they must forget those experiences in their past which would overwhelm and mentally break them—experiences that are figured in the text by the eponymous character of *Beloved*, the revenant of a baby girl killed by her own mother to prevent her from being taken back into slavery. At the novel's end, *Beloved* is expelled by the community but continues to haunt its margins. As I will argue in the following, *Beloved* thus represents not only those aspects of slavery which must be repressed so that those living in its wake can go on with their lives; she can also be taken to stand for the very medium where this process of healing is dramatized for the reader, but which has to be disavowed in order for it to take effect: i.e., the printed letters on the page, which remain, after we have closed the book, “thirsty” for meaning (Nancy 38-39), supplicating for the reader's return.

II

Read as a historical novel about slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* is curiously devoid of the factual accoutrements which usually serve to give a sense of historical substantiveness to fiction of this type. Pivotal historical events such as the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill or the Dred Scott decision are mentioned only in passing; the participation of Paul D, one of the novel's major characters, in the Civil War figures only as a minor episode which has left little impression on him. Instead, the novel focuses on the day-to-day life of a small group of former slaves living in the house on Bluestone Road 124, on the outskirts of Cincinnati, telling of their daily efforts “to keep the past at bay” (51) and tracing the process of their psychological recovery. As Morrison has pointed out on several occasions, her aim was not to give an account of slavery as a social institution but to make it “a personal experience” for the reader (“The Pain of Being Black” 257; *Beloved* xix). Attaining this goal is, of course, a manifest impossibility—not only because of the limits inherent in what reading can do,

but also because slavery is precisely the denial of personhood. It is thus only consequential that the novel puts its characters at a temporal remove from their own experience of slavery: the diegetic present of the novel is set in the year 1873, and the former lives of the characters as slaves are presented in a series of flashbacks as the novel unfolds.

Properly speaking, then, *Beloved* is a novel not so much about slavery itself as about its effects on those who live in its wake. This is thoroughly in keeping with the elusive ontological status of trauma as it has been described by psychoanalysts such as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok and literary theorists from Dominick LaCapra to Cathy Caruth: the traumatic event itself can never be 'present' to the subject; it permanently resists recollection and can become present only through its linguistic and somatic figurations, i.e., through its symptoms. Trauma manifests itself in language, "through ellipsis, indirection and detour, or fragmentation and deformation" (Schwab 107), and in the body, whose pathologies reflect the psychological fragmentation of its subject. Morrison's cast of characters in *Beloved* has been marked by slavery in exactly this sense. Sethe, the novel's chief protagonist, goes color-blind after killing her baby daughter in order to keep her from being brought back to Sweet Home, the plantation where she herself had been kept as a slave. Her second daughter Denver becomes deaf and dumb when a class-mate asks her about this event; she recovers her ability to hear and speak only years later, and continues to be plagued by recurrent nightmares in which she is decapitated by her mother (243). Paul D, the only other surviving slave from Sweet Home, temporarily loses control of his hands after being sold off from the plantation (126); after escaping from slavery, he feels that his "red heart" has been replaced by a rusty tobacco tin which permanently shuts in his most shameful memories (86)—an image that illustrates almost too neatly Abraham and Torok's description of the traumatic event as being entombed in a psychic "crypt" (135-65).

This "corporeal cryptography" (Schwab 99) is matched by the elliptic narrative form of the novel, which dramatizes the way in

which the "encrypted" memories seep back into the conscious lives of the characters. One of the first things we learn about Sethe is that "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6), yet already in the opening chapter, the narrative is shot through with fragments of past events which assail Sethe as if coming from outside: "baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil," "men coming to nurse her," the "scent of ink" (6). These ominous images will only begin to make sense to the reader as the narrative progresses, looping through ever more detailed analepses. The disjointed character of the novel's discourse (in the narratological sense), with its fragmented plot and shifting narrative perspectives, can thus be understood as mimetic of the psychological derangement from which its characters suffer, and which also finds expression in the fantasies of dismemberment that haunt them. Accordingly, the reader's activity of synthesizing a coherent story from this discourse can be seen as paralleling the psychological recovery of the characters themselves as they work through their repressed memories, "reconfiguring" them in order to construct viable personal identities (Henderson 91). As a whole, *Beloved* has therefore often been interpreted as enacting a "ritual of healing" (Krumholz 396) which inaugurates a new community encompassing the novel's characters as well as its readers by involving them in a "shared experience" (Morrison, *Beloved* xviii). As Homi Bhabha emphatically puts it with reference to the chapters at the center of the novel where the voices of Sethe and her two daughters are merged: "it is impossible not to see in them the healing of history, a community reclaimed in the making of a name" (17).

The name to which Bhabha refers here is, of course, that of the character for which the novel is named: Beloved—the girl who walks out of the waters of the Ohio, is taken in by Sethe, and finally recognized as the revenant of the daughter whom Sethe had killed eighteen years ago, after their escape from Sweet Home. It is the presence of Beloved, more than any of the other characters, that accounts for much of the novel's remarkable pathos, and it is her enigmatic fate at the novel's end which puts into question 'therapeutic' readings of the

novel. As her name signifies both the novel itself and a figure within that novel—a figure, furthermore, whose spectral character invites allegorical attributions—it also gives *Beloved* a self-referential twist which has attracted surprisingly little critical attention. Much has been written about this character. For my present purposes, it will suffice to say that the majority of commentators go along with Gurleen Grewal when she writes that the figure of Beloved embodies the “principle of the ‘return of the repressed’” (105). Beloved’s elusive ontological status is thus linked to the ‘ghostly’ character of the trauma of slavery which can be neither fully remembered nor entirely forgotten.

If Beloved thus embodies trauma, and trauma is knowable only through its effects, what then are the effects of Beloved’s arrival at Bluestone 124? Most strikingly, she solicits stories. Her presence induces the characters around her—Sethe, Denver, and Paul D—not only to remember the past they have been repressing, but also to shape it into narratives and relate these narratives to Beloved and to each other. Sethe is the first to realize “the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling”; it becomes “a way to feed her,” to placate her “bottomless” longing (69). To her own surprise, “because every mention of her past life hurt,” Sethe shares Beloved’s pleasure: “[As] she began telling [...], she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it [...].” (69). Thus with her first plea, “Tell me your diamonds,” Beloved prompts Sethe to relate the story of her wedding with Halle; Beloved’s second question, “Your woman never fix your hair?” (72), takes Sethe all the way back to the few memories she retains of her childhood: of a mother whom she barely saw other than as a distant figure working in the rice fields, and of her wet nurse, Nan, who spoke to Sethe in an African language she “understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now,” and who told Sethe about her mother. Nan’s brief speech, as Sethe recollects it, begins and ends with two sentences which emphasize the parallelism between this scene of oral instruction and the one that is taking place in the diegetic present, where Sethe has now assumed Nan’s place: “Telling you. I

am telling you, small girl Sethe" (74).

This scene—of Sethe recounting to her daughters what Nan told her about her mother—is only the first of a sequence of stories which are evoked by *Beloved*'s presence, and which together form the narrative pith of the novel. It sets the tone for the many acts of telling that will follow: recounting the past is both painful and necessary; its most important function is to establish origins and genealogies. Only through narration can even the most intimate human bonds be snatched from the oblivion to which slavery wishes to consign them; only through narration can these bonds be maintained or recreated, albeit only in a tenuous form whose force consists in nothing but the force of the narrator's word. Sethe knows herself to be her mother's daughter primarily because Nan has told her so. A similar set of concerns is at work in a scene that follows only a little later. Denver is the first to recognize *Beloved* as the ghost of her dead sister, and as she is grateful for *Beloved*'s companionship, Denver is afraid that she will "get up and wander out of the yard just the way she wandered in" (80). So Denver tells her the story of her own (Denver's) birth during Sethe's escape to Ohio, in order "to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold *Beloved*" (90). With *Beloved* as her audience, Denver is led to engage with the story (which she has never heard in its entirety) more profoundly than ever before:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through *Beloved*. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. [...] And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more *Beloved* liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing *Beloved*'s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved [...]. Denver spoke, *Beloved* listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was [...]. (92-93)

Even though it is only Denver who tells the story, the narrator nevertheless insists here that it is not in fact a monologue: Denver's responsiveness to *Beloved*'s questions, both actual and anticipated, literally "animates" the tale. The interaction between narrator and

narratee creates not only a bond of intimacy between them, a communal interiority that encompasses both, it also endows the tale with a living presence—“blood” and a “heartbeat.”

III

If we recall Claude Lanzmann’s cautionary remarks as quoted above, it seems that what Morrison sets forth in this passage is a model of a form of ‘learning’ about the historical and personal trauma of slavery which would not at the same time also be a way of ‘forgetting’ it; in other words, Denver’s interaction with Beloved provides a model for the interaction of the reader with the book of the same name. Indeed, Morrison’s poetological reflections in other texts invite a reading of this scene as a metafictional comment on the aesthetic principles which inform her art. The scene dovetails neatly with Morrison’s avowed commitment to a form of writing that would “reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture.” Writing in a narrative voice that is “speakerly, aural, colloquial” (“Unspeakable Things” 150) is only the least of these efforts. Such a form, she writes, “must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values” (“Memory” 388-89). To put it differently—and to return to the terms which I introduced in my opening remarks on the *Phaedrus*—, writing must *simulate* orality: it must assume a form which involves the reader in the same way as a dialogue between living speakers would, allowing not only for a call, but also for a response, a “spoken counterpoint” (Holloway 73; also cf. Sale 42-43). It must produce, to quote Plato’s *Phaedrus* again, “a speech living and endowed with soul” (276a).

The *Phaedrus* is a text concerned with the transition from orality to literacy—the transition from a culture which transmits knowledge primarily through oral instruction to one in which written texts increasingly take over this function (Havelock 198-99). The anxiety

that writing will destroy rather than preserve knowledge is also an anxiety about the loss of presence and communal intimacy which orality implied. This same anxiety also runs through *Beloved*, most of whose characters have already passed out of the 'pure' orality of their West-African ancestors and are standing just outside the threshold to literacy; of all the important characters in the novel, only Denver has begun to learn to read and write. One of the moments in which the anxiety about the loss of oral culture surfaces is the already mentioned scene in which Sethe remembers Nan, whose African language she can no longer speak, even as the narrator insists that "the message [...] was and had been there all along" (74); but it is expressed most clearly in the refusal of Sixo—the only one of the slaves at Sweet Home to have come directly from Africa—to learn to read and write: "[he] said it would change his mind—make him forget things he shouldn't and memorize things he shouldn't and he didn't want his mind messed up" (245).³ Presumably, one of the things he is afraid of forgetting is the different relation of the subject to language which subtends the African traditions which Sixo represents; that is to say, he is afraid of forgetting the power of "nommo"—"the magic power of the word to call things into being" (Handley 677) which, according to Janheinz Jahn (124-26), is fundamental to West African conceptions of language, and which Morrison herself has invoked as a measure for the work she seeks to accomplish in her writing: "I sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text" ("Unspeakable Things" 162). Even if one were to assume that she is speaking hyperbolically, it is quite clear that Morrison sees the ability of her texts to endow their characters with a living presence as an African heirloom which is absolutely central to her work.

In *Beloved*, orality and the possibility of simulating it in a written text are thus inextricably tied up with the promise of resurrecting the dead—both those who are literally dead, such as Beloved and the victims of the Middle Passage, and those who are caught in the kind of 'death in life' which is the consequence of trauma. Significantly, the

scene which Denver and Beloved 'bring to life' in their antiphonal narration is itself the scene of a birth, and its protagonists are Sethe and the white girl Amy Denver, after whom Denver would later be named; when the narrator remarks at the end of the scene that "[there] was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well" (100), the comment seems to apply not only to young Sethe and Amy Denver, but just as much to Denver and Beloved, who have 'resurrected' them in their story. And again, this may be seen as dramatizing, on the novel's thematic level, the work that Morrison seeks to perform with her reader. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison remarked that her image of Beloved was partly based on an old photograph by Van der Zee, showing a girl who had been killed by a jealous former lover ("A Conversation" 207); by writing about her, Morrison claims, she is effectively resurrecting her:

bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails might be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. So that now she comes running when called [...] she is here now, alive. (217)

Here, bringing the girl back to life principally means giving her a body *through writing*. Remembering her is recollecting her body, part by part and word for word—literally 're-membering' her. The pun here is not mine, but Morrison's: In another essay, she has described *Beloved* as being about "the process of re-membering the body and its parts, re-membering the family and the neighborhood, and our national history" ("Home" 6). It is just such a process of "re-membering" which the characters in the novel undergo. Those who suffer from the trauma of slavery experience their bodies as fragmented or threatened by fragmentation. Overcoming the trauma means to restore the integrity of their bodies and to reclaim them as their own; as Sixo says about the power of his lover, the "Thirty-Mile Woman": "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (321). At the end of the novel Paul D returns to Sethe, who has suffered a complete breakdown after the expulsion of Beloved by the women of the community.

He offers to take care of her and suggests that he begin by bathing her; Sethe wonders: "Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? [...] And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (321). This refers the reader back to the scene when Sethe first arrived at Bluestone 124 after her escape from Sweet Home and Baby Suggs bathed all the parts of her body, one after the other; and the act of cleansing and rejoining the body is linked, again, to storytelling, when the reader is informed that Paul D, as he proceeds to wash Sethe, "wants to put his story next to hers" (321).

It is, however, the figure of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, with whom this theme of 're-memberment'—of remembering and healing the slaves' dismembered personalities—is most persistently connected. After her son Halle has bought her freedom, Baby Suggs discovers, as if for the first time, that she has a body: "[S]uddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling: 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands'" (166). Suggs becomes an "unchurched" (102) preacher to the community of free blacks around Cincinnati. The chief subject of her sermons, which she delivers in a place in the woods referred to as "the Clearing," is precisely the necessity of re-membering the body:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. [...] They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands, love them! Raise them up and kiss them. [...] And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. (104-05)

Clifton Spargo has argued that this passage should be seen as evidence of Suggs's inability to extricate herself from trauma, as her speech reinscribes the mistreatment of the slaves' bodies even as it

renounces them (115). However, if it is read in conjunction with the passage where she bathes Sethe, it seems justified to understand it as another model for the process of healing, recovering and remembering towards which the novel as a whole seems to be gesturing. Like Denver's narration, Suggs's speech is not a monologue, but an antiphonal exchange with the community—a community whose social bond is created and reinforced in the shared act of recollecting the past. Suggs cannot “re-member” by herself—only the response of the community can consummate the ritual of healing. The reader, too, is supposed to step into that circle of intimacy which the novel creates and to answer Suggs's call for “re-membering,” becoming a member of the community and a story-teller in his turn; as Morrison writes (with reference to another novel, *Song of Solomon*): “The reader *as narrator* asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and [narrative] ‘voice’ stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact [...]” (“Unspeakable Things” 37; my italics). Thus “history-making,” as Linda Krumholz has it, “becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author” (395). Just as antiphonal narration creates an intimacy between Denver and Beloved in which the past can be re-animated, and just as Baby Suggs's preaching creates a communal interiority where the body is re-membered, so *Beloved* is assumed to create a space into which the reader must step in order to fulfill its promise of communal restoration. The novel would thus do for the reader what Beloved does for Denver, allowing him to “see” and “feel” like the characters in the novel do—“through *Beloved*” (92; my italics).

IV

Now I certainly do not wish to contend that it is impossible to read *Beloved* in this way—it might very well be that this is an appropriate model of how the text functions in many class-rooms (and Linda Krumholz's suggestion that *Beloved* demands a new form of pedagogy which would replace “fact-based” instruction with “initiatory and

healing rituals" certainly seems to point in this direction; 405). Yet it must not be forgotten that such a take on the novel effectively conflates "the representation of cultural practices with the latter's operativity" (Schinko 303n; my translation). In other words, it assumes that the novel itself can function in the same way as the scenes of antiphony and oral instruction which the novel describes—that orality can be successfully simulated, as it were, in a written text. It should be obvious enough that such an understanding of the text's work must suppress some of the qualities which clearly separate the written from the spoken word and which always threaten to undercut the work of 're-membering' attributed to the latter.

To begin with, the spoken word disappears the moment after it has been uttered; what has been said can be repeated, but as the original utterance is no longer available for comparison, it is fully displaced by its reiterations—and it is precisely this circumstance which gives rise to the impression that oral memory (whose bearers remind "themselves from within," Plato 275a) is more faithful than written memory. This transience is not incidental, but a necessary prerequisite of oral communication: if speech persisted in time, subsequent utterances could not be understood. Accordingly, oral communication requires that its elements be ordered in a temporal sequence, that all of its participants are physically co-present in a shared space (such as Baby Suggs's Clearing), and that certain protocols of turn-taking are observed (such as antiphony). With written communication, a completely different set of restrictions comes into play. *Littera scripta manet*—as Christian Huck and Carsten Schinko explicate the consequences of Horace's dictum, words and sentences

can exist next to each other [...]. [This] spatial arrangement has an opposite effect on the participants in communication. They are now arranged in time. Writing and reading hardly ever occur simultaneously. [...] For communication in the medium of writing there is absolutely no need for a co-presence of the participants, they can be, and mostly are: scattered in space. (60)

Writing thus endows communication with both greater durability and wider reach, but it also imposes much higher hurdles for its continua-

tion—with the lack of a shared context, it becomes less probable that what is communicated is understood and taken up in a sympathetic manner. Within an oral setting, there is a direct feedback between the speaker and her audience. The speaker can observe how her words resonate with her audience and she can recalibrate her utterance to the exigencies of the moment. The writer, on the other hand, has no way of knowing how her words will be received, or who will receive them—she cannot see the reader’s approving nod, nor can she lower her voice in order to exclude some potential listeners from communication. If the spoken word gathers the speaker and her listeners into a collective interiority, the letter puts writer and reader out in the open, at a remove from each other, in a way that neither can ever be sure whether communication was ‘successful.’ At the risk of overstating the point, one may say that oral discourse produces communities, while reading (at least after silent reading has become the norm) shapes people into individuals.⁴ The persistence of the written word allows for differing interpretations of its meaning, and, more importantly, it allows for these interpretations to be *observed* as differing. As Niklas Luhmann has argued, it therefore opens up the possibility of “assuming the position of a second-order observer” (36)—it makes it possible to observe how others observe the world, to compare their viewpoints (which now are simultaneously available), and thus exposes these viewpoints as contingent, i.e., as only one possibility among others. To some extent, this is of course also true for oral communication, yet here the experience of the signifier’s indeterminacy is as fleeting as the signifier itself—the contingency of one’s own understanding and the possibility of alternatives to the latter is easily passed over and forgotten. While it may be true that “reading a text oralizes it” (Ong 175, qtd. in Holloway 73; for a similar view, cf. Gadamer 441), the decisive difference to spoken discourse is that these oralizations can never entirely displace the texts which they are oralizations of. Thus, there is no more room for the illusion attending oral memory: that it could fully recover an original presence. What is recorded in writing can never achieve the same effect of presence as

that which is recalled in oral discourse—*because* it can never be fully forgotten.

What a 'therapeutic' understanding of the novel, insofar as it emphasizes the healing power of oral discourse, therefore usually entails is a sidelining of the text *as text*—a text which is *read* rather than received, and which therefore always threatens to puncture the intimacy of the simulated oral community because it allows itself to be read against the grain. The dismissive stance Morrison takes toward readers who refuse to participate in the work of "nommo" illustrates the point: "I learn nothing from those who resist it, except, of course, the sometimes fascinating display of their struggle" ("Unspeakable Things" 162). If simulated orality is to be effective, those who fail to be seduced by it must be kept outside. And there is another elision which most 'therapeutic' readings of the novel share, an elision which is correlated to their tendency to mistake the oral protocols described on the thematic level as models of their own relation to the text: such readings have relatively little to say about the fate of the *character* Beloved at the end of the novel, except that it clears the path for the recovery of the community. As Sethe devotes herself exclusively to her daughter's revenant, Beloved begins to drain her of her intellect, her vitality and even of her will to live. Alarmed, the women of the community gather in front of Bluestone 124 to exorcise the ghost. This is how the scene is described:

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

Like so many other scenes of the book, this one, too, is clearly designed so as to exalt the power of the human voice to heal and to bring into being—Sethe is cleansed and "re-membered" as the community (which had shunned her since the infanticide) takes her

back inside the sonic circle of their song. All the differences that threaten to rend the community are suspended, sublated in a single "sound." Through their song, the women avail themselves of the creative power of "nommo" in its purest form. Morrison's wording explicitly sets it into opposition to a Western (more specifically, a Judeo-Christian) understanding of language, pointing to the continuing presence of African origins: "[...] Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and standers joined her. They stopped praying and took 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." (305) The "sound" is closer to music than to language, it communicates no particular meanings but only the togetherness of the community.

If this "sound" (rather than the semantic dimension of language) is the source from which oral discourse derives its power to recall the past into presence and to heal the community, a written text which strives to emulate these effects must, in a sense, disavow itself—it must entice the reader to lose sight of the letter. As Morrison has put it on several occasions, "language must get out of the way" (xix; cf. also "Unspeakable Things" 162) To be properly understood, this statement must be read against the backdrop of the idealized (and, in its final consequence, non-linguistic) notion of orality that is dramatized in *Beloved* and developed more explicitly in her poetological essays: what she is aiming at is, in fact, a language that would touch the reader with the same kind of immediacy which she attributes to the "sound"—a language which would deprive the reader of the possibility to distance himself, foreclosing reflection and thus, as Morrison states her purpose in the same quote, rendering "enslavement as a personal experience" (xix). When Morrison writes that "language must get out of the way," she is, I would therefore argue, also describing the process of "forgetting" the letters as the reader "oralizes" the text, bringing the characters of the novel into presence and being drawn into that space of intimacy where alone slavery can become such a personal experience. When *Beloved* commands Paul D to

"touch me on the inside part and call me my name" (137), the scene may thus be taken to allegorize the seduction of the reader by the novel, including his engulfment in an almost 'womb-like' interiority. As Paul D is seduced by *Beloved*, he is also "re-membered": the tobacco tin in which his traumatic memories were locked away breaks open, and he is awoken by the sound of his own voice repeating: "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (138). At the end of the novel, Paul D recalls the experience of "coupling with her": "beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" (311). I am not sure whether this "ocean-deep place" is the very same one which the choir is "sounding" as it exorcizes *Beloved* (308); but certainly, it is yet another moment where the text figures its seductive effect on the reader, this time as he emerges ("beached and gobbling air") from the experience into which *Beloved* had drawn him—and appropriately, the scene is positioned only a few pages before the novel's end.

What "get[s] out of the way" at the end of the novel is, however, not only "language"—it is *Beloved* herself. And *Beloved* does not simply disappear. She falls apart, repeating her first decapitation and literalizing the fears of dismemberment which have haunted all of the novel's central characters. The language the text uses to describe her disintegration inverts the vocabulary of "re-membering" which we have already become familiar with: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, [...] the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (323). The community lets her fall into oblivion—and it does so in a manner that is characteristic for a primarily oral culture:

After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw [Beloved] that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her [...] to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her, too. (323-24)

Thus, on the concluding pages of the novel, *Beloved* unravels itself. Oral discourse, the text seems to indicate, can heal traumatized individuals by recreating the bonds that tie them into a single community, it can “re-member.” What it cannot remember is that every such act of remembrance, every production of a communal past is at the same time also an act of exclusion and selection, of forgetting—we are only able to remember some things because we forget others. The simulated orality of the text—or its temporary oralization in the act of reading—can produce a vicarious bond between the reader and the characters of the novel. However, this intimacy must break down as the reader puts down the book and the words on the page collapse back into bare letters, their very bareness calling for the reader’s return: “Down by the stream in the back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there” (324). Like the ghost’s footprints, the written words remain, a reminder of that which had to be “dis(re)membered” in order for the community to re-member itself.

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NOTES

¹That Plato’s text remains strictly ambiguous on this point is Derrida’s contention in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” where the designation of writing as *pharmakon* serves him as a point of entry for elaborating the logic of the supplement.

²For Michaels, this conception of our relation to the past is part and parcel with the identitarian ontology which has debilitated political thought since the late 1960s.

³Of course, writing is also directly implicated in the subjection of African Americans, as its possession is both the criterion and the means by which the white masters define their humanity against the animality of their slaves—a circumstance that is impressively dramatized in the much discussed scene where the new master at Sweet Home, known to the reader only as “schoolteacher,” asks his nephews to list (in writing, and using the ink which Sethe had prepared)

Sethe's "animal characteristics" (228; for an analysis of this scene, as well for the question of Sixo's descent, cf. Keizer 108-09). However, literacy's power to supplant oral forms of sociality is not predicated on the role which it plays in racist ideology and can therefore be treated as a separate issue.

⁴Which then, of course, have to be re-collectivized in different ways—for examples, cf. Benedikt Anderson.

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