

Hunger “Beyond Appetite”: Nurture Dialectics in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* Asma Hichri

Abstract: This paper traces the various manifestations of the hunger/ingestion motif in *Beloved* and its implications at the psychological and diegetic levels, mapping out the connection between hunger and storytelling as a form of resistance. At a deeper level, however, the novel also evinces how the hunger/ingestion dialectics inform not only African Americans’ emotional and spiritual deprivation but also the diegetic in(di)gestion, disadjustments, and dis(re)memberment of their history and identity. By mapping out the fusion between the intra-diegetic and extradiegetic, this essay ultimately argues that Morrison’s transgressive re-reading/re-writing of the imperial archive of black history and identity essentially requires both “a visceral reliving of [its] trauma[s]” (Young 9) and a parodic o/aural and narratological reinscription of its predatory patterns.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; African-American fiction; hunger; appropriation

Nurture dialectics are a central motif in Toni Morrison’s fiction and, more specifically, in her novel *Beloved* (1987). From a cursory reading, the novel reveals the extent to which the African American experience of repression and dispersal has been informed by the dialectics of hunger, cannibalism, and appropriation. Yet a close reading of the narrative reveals that the dynamics of hunger and ingestion are not only physical and anthropological but also psychological and narratological. A thorough investigation of these dynamics therefore invites an exploration of nurture imagery in the novel as well as its sociological,

anthropological, historical, and narratological inscriptions. Images and scenes depicting food with its social and religious connotations abound in the narrative. Given food's association with communal gathering, nurture symbolises the entertainment and preservation of social relationships and the creation of new ties. Critics have mulled over the significance of food imagery and its social dimensions in the novel. Lynne Marie Houston argues that the tropes of food and hunger are deployed to "mark and define relationships," for "they often mediate or inform politics of race" (167). She also goes as far as to maintain that Morrison's characters sustain their relationship with and apprehension of the outside world "through food, through their reactions to hunger, and through the types of hunger they experience" (167). Houston finally interprets the characters' expressions of hunger as no more than outward manifestations of their sexual, emotional, and psychological deprivation, arguing that Morrison's metaphorical dramatisation of hunger "works so that the relationship of a character with food takes on some of the hidden fears and anxieties of the character's being or history" (166).

Yet approaching nurture dialectics in Morrison's novel from this perspective amounts to reducing the characters' coming to terms with their sexual and emotional impulses to a process of reverse sublimation,¹ whereby instead of transforming physical impulses into socially constructive achievements, the characters supplant one physical desire for another. In her essay, "Apple Pie Ideology' and the Politics of Appetite in the Novels of Toni Morrison," parallel to Houston's reading, Emma Parker establishes a psychological link between hunger and African Americans' experience of oppression and deprivation (615). In *Beloved*, Parker argues, the returning ghost's ravenous desire for food "is only an extreme manifestation of the hunger, both literal and metaphorical, that all the characters in the book experience as part of the legacy of slavery" (616). More specifically, Parker dwells on the ways in which gender and race shape appetite, focusing on the significance of sugar as a "potent symbol" which, given its association with "stereotypes of femininity," often "acts as a signifier of race and gender power structures" in Morrison's text (614).

Other commentators offer historiographic elaborations on the themes of hunger and cannibalism in Morrison's fiction. Alan Rice's study of "the cannibal trope as a key to the exploration of slavery and racism" ("Who's Eating Whom" 5) in *Beloved* is noteworthy in this respect. Rice underlines the historiographic connection between *Beloved*'s cannibalistic impulse and the slaves' terrible journey across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. In Rice's sense, Morrison's "ingenious reworking" of the cannibal trope as a replication of white oppression, a technique that evokes the postcolonial notion of "writing back," ironically undermines the oppressor's ability to define the racial other as a brutish cannibal ("Who's Eating Whom" 119). In fact, *Beloved* constitutes a meta-discourse on cannibalism, which mainly uncovers how this "complex mythology" was exploited by "powerful forces as a useful method of control over the conquered" (*Radical Narratives* 125).² More importantly, however, Morrison's parodic return to such a stereotype certainly reveals, in Rice's terms, that "the definers' power is far from ubiquitous," and that "it is heavily circumscribed by the power of the defined to reply in kind" ("Who's Eating Whom" 116).

Although the theme of hunger has received considerable attention in relation to the slaves' experience of deprivation, it has rarely been explored as a replication of the patterns of appropriation, ingestion, and domination devised and legitimised by their enslavers. Moreover, few critics have mapped the hunger/ingestion pattern onto the narrative. In underlining her characters' historical disjunctures and their diasporic identities, Morrison resorts to various mediational choices in order to excavate a silenced and oppressed past that has been ingested and consumed by the master narrative of American history. This article traces the various manifestations of the hunger/ingestion motif in Morrison's *Beloved* and its implications not only at the psychological but also at the thematic and diegetic levels. The first part of this essay explores the significance of nurture symbolism and its various dialects as far as social relations are concerned, dwelling on the curious relationship between "the politics of appetite" (Parker 614) and the politics of appropriation. The second part investigates how the hunger/ingestion dialectics inform not only "African Americans' emotional, physical, and spiritual malnu-

trition” (Parker 672) but also the diegetic in(di)gestion, disadjustments, and dis(re)memberment of their history and identity.

A thorough examination of the hunger motif in *Beloved* reveals that Morrison’s deployment of food politics is extremely deconstructive. The presence of nurture imagery can be detected in the opening scene, which introduces the black family on whose circumstances the story hinges:

The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door sill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. (1)

The reference to the cake, the chickpeas, and the soda crackers evokes a sense of unease and apprehension that undermine the positive connotations commonly ascribed to nurture. *Beloved*’s assertion of her presence through “sharing” sustenance with her brothers symbolically evidences her belonging to the family and her firm claim over the intimate space its members occupy. Ironically, the ghost’s awkward and somewhat aggressive commensal rituals undercut all feelings of security, affection, and warmth typically attributed to family meals. Apprehended as insults, these uncanny practices ultimately trigger Howard and Buglar’s desertion of the family home and the utter dissolution of family ties.

In the same chapter, Morrison associates nurture with the disruption of kinship relations in other ways:

She [Denver] ashed over the fire and pulled the pan of biscuits from the oven. The jelly cupboard was on its back, its contents lying in a heap in the corner of the bottom shelf. She took out

a jar, and, looking around for a plate, found half of one by the door. These things she carried out to the porch steps, where she sat down. The two of them had gone up there. Stepping lightly, easy-footed, they had climbed the white stairs, leaving her down below. She pried the wire from the top of the jar and then the lid. . . . She took a biscuit and pulled off its black top. Smoke curled from the soft white insides.

She missed her brothers. Buglar and Howard would be twenty-two and twenty-three now. (22)

Paradoxically, the reference to food in this scene is juxtaposed with a reference to the absence of Sethe, a source of affective nurture for Denver. As such, food imagery seems to highlight Denver's loneliness after her mother's retreat with Paul D, "the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had" (23). It is worth noting that the presence of food in this scene marks a triple loss of affection and communion for Denver. In addition to its association with the temporary interruption of her relationship with her mother, Denver's solitary meal equally underscores her deprivation from her dead sister's spectral presence with Paul D's exorcism of the ghost. Furthermore, it highlights her longing for her brothers after their departure from the haunted house. The presence of food ultimately signals Denver's temporary exclusion from the family nucleus as she decides to eat her biscuits on the "porch steps" (22) rather than in the kitchen.

Another passage where nurture imagery appears is the description of Baby Suggs' celebration of Sethe's arrival to 124 with her newborn child:

Baby Suggs's three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati—over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch— became a wagonload of ice cakes for a wash-tub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the centre of things? How come she always

knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, . . . singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone.

Now to take two buckets of blackberries and make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice and sugar, batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread, short-bread—it made them mad. (161)

In this scene, food imagery is impregnated with biblical significance. The reference to Baby Suggs' "three (maybe four) pies," which "grew to ten (maybe twelve)," and "Sethe's two hens," which turned into "five turkeys," alludes to the abundance of food being a sign of God's providence and mercy.³ The lavishness and wealth that infuse the scene thus stand for God's love and blessing, which are bestowed on Sethe and her baby upon their arrival to Cincinnati. This idea is confirmed by the sentence "loaves and fishes were His powers" (Morrison, *Beloved* 161), which both replicates Christ's miracle of multiplying fish and loaves and evinces divine agency, thereby reinforcing the holy atmosphere of the scene. In the Bible, fish is apprehended as a sign of "God's grace of deliverance and salvation" as well as a symbol of baptism (Ryken et al. 1027). Similarly, bread is considered a "miraculous sustenance of life for God's chosen people in their wilderness wanderings at the time of the Exodus" (Ryken et al. 438). As such, the presence of bread and fish emblematises God's bountiful provision of sustenance for the runaway slave and her daughter in their "exodus," thereby highlighting their sanctity, purity, and religious merit.

In this respect, Sethe's rite of passage from slavery to freedom corresponds to a great extent to Bourdieu's theory of rites of passage and his enumeration of the properties that make these social rituals act as "rites of consecration" or "rites of institution" (117). In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu examines the social functions of rites of passage as well as "the social significance of the boundaries or limits" they allow one to "transgress in a lawful way" (117). "By stressing the temporal transition" from one state to another, Bourdieu argues, rites of

passage necessarily establish a social boundary that separates “those who have undergone it, not from those who have not yet undergone it, but from those who will not undergo it in any sense” (117).

In this sense, the feast constitutes a ritual that inaugurates Sethe's passage from slavery to freedom as well as her newborn baby's christening. From a cursory reading, the feast inaugurates Sethe and her children's admission to a life of freedom and humanity among the Cincinnati community. At a deeper level, however, it simultaneously severs all connections between them and the townspeople. In actual fact, the banquet draws a permanent distinction between fugitive slaves, to whom the rite pertains, and the free community of Cincinnati, whom the rite does not include. As such, it ostracises the latter and alienates them not only from Sethe but also from Baby Suggs, whose holiness begins to arouse suspicion and jealousy. In this sense, the banquet consecrates “an *arbitrary boundary*” between the runaway family and the townspeople, inviting “recognition” that this boundary *is* “legitimate” (Bourdieu 118; emphasis in original). Indeed, Sethe's rite of passage to freedom entails, in Bourdieu's terms, “a solemn transgression . . . of the limits which constitute the social and mental order which rites are designed to safeguard at all costs” (118). In this respect, the juxtaposition of the image of God's bounty with the townsfolk's memories of Baby Suggs' slave life establishes this “rite of institution” (117) as a “process of investiture” (Bourdieu 119) whose symbolic significance somehow transforms the person consecrated in various ways, mainly through transfiguring the representations and behaviour formerly imputed to Baby Suggs.

The banquet also transforms “the representation that the invested person has of himself” (Bourdieu 119), thereby marking Baby Suggs and her family's acquisition of a new identity and provoking the neighbours' jealousy. Ironically, Sethe and Baby Suggs' sanctimonious transgression lies in the generosity, hospitality, and altruism they exhibit in a house “rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety” (Morrison, *Beloved* 161). This unrecognised conduct is misjudged by the townspeople as a sign of pride, hence their envy and malevolence: “It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the

stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124” (162). The neighbours’ envy and resentment of the runaway family’s allegedly prideful display of wealth is substantiated by Baby Suggs’ interpretation of their reaction the following day: “Her friends and neighbours were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (163).

In fact, whereas the reference to bread and fish reinforces the runaway family’s “holy” status, for the townspeople the overabundance of food symbolises their treachery and their usurpation of God’s providence. Significantly preceded by the reference to “batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread,” and “shortbread,” which “made them mad” (161), the following excerpt underlines the neighbours’ ultimate indignation at this miraculous feast:

Loaves and fishes were His powers. They did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back. Who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old white boy as God knows they had. Who had not even escaped slavery—had in fact, been bought out of it by a doting son and driven to the Ohio river in a wagon—free papers folded between her breasts (driven by the very man who had been her master, who also paid her resettlement fee . . . and rented a house with two floors and a well from the Bodwins. (161–62)

In Michel de De Certeau’s “gastronomic semantics,” bread symbolises “the hardships of life and work; it is the memory of a better standard of living acquired the hard way over the course of previous generations” (De Certeau et al. 86). In this scene, however, bread is doubly de-symbolised as the neighbours fail to read its “social writing” (87) and find the blessing bestowed on the runaway family incongruous with their allegedly unheroic past. For De Certeau, bread also implicitly “allows one to know if someone is with or against us” mainly because it uncovers one’s social origin (87). It is thus not surprising that the neighbours mistake the feast as a manifestation of wealth and power rather than a consolidation of severed community ties.

In this respect, it is important to note that power and social rank are closely connected to nurture, since “eating, particularly who eats and who does not, emblematises who has economic and social power and who does not” (Silver 87). If nurture as such signals one’s social status, then Sethe’s baptismal banquet celebrates the runaway family’s dignified position and the hierarchical distance between them and the Cincinnati community, a status rather exclusively ascribed to white people. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, banquet images maintain an essential relation to “struggle, triumph, and regeneration” (*Rabelais* 282). In banquets, nurture celebrates the “triumph” of the body “over the world, over its enemy” and its growth “at the world’s expense” (283). The runaway family’s festive meal thus inaugurates their rebirth and triumph over the repression and injustice inherent in their former status. Yet it also celebrates their growth at the world’s expense. Morrison’s reference to the townspeople’s indigestion as “they swallowed baking soda . . . to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty” (162) unveils not only their gluttony and covetousness but also their apprehension of this conquest. Harrowed by the anxiety of being dominated by the runaway family with regard to whom they already feel belittled and insulted, the townsfolk bite back by backbiting their hosts. Ironically ingesting and replicating white fears of the racial other, they anticipate the runaway family’s atrocious fate as they chatter “in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride” (Morrison, *Beloved* 162). In an image that conflates ingestion, congestion, and indigestion, Morrison draws the cycle of psychosocial pathology that haunts the fugitive family’s existence within the institution of slavery. In D. Scott Hinson’s words, the “violence” and oppression “instigated by whites” are deeply internalised and engraved in blacks’ collective unconscious, and they spread within their community “of [their] own accord, perverting and twisting emotions” (153). Feeling belittled and offended by Baby Suggs’ “reckless generosity” and divested of the shared socio-economic background that used to bind its members together, the Cincinnati community suddenly retaliates by subjecting their neighbours to the same oppressive patterns to which they were victims within the institution of slavery. “Powerless to confront their oppressors,” the neighbours strike out “against equally powerless mem-

bers of their own community” (Hinson 153). The invocation of rats as symbols of destruction, death, and decay conspicuously prefigures the apocalyptic coming of the four horsemen—“schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff”—the following day to recapture Sethe and her children, as well as Sethe’s murder of her daughter Beloved (Morrison, *Beloved* 174–75).

Through de-symbolising conventional symbols, the banquet scene clearly aligns Morrison’s narrative with the literature of the grotesque. In Bakhtin’s terms, “the essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life” (*Rabelais* 62). If “banquets in the Bible imply and display blessing, prosperity, abundance, wealth, victory and joy” (Ryken et al. 282), then Sethe’s feast perfectly illustrates this biblical image. However, such connotations are reversed in the following chapter. Sethe’s murder of Beloved marks this feast as a funeral banquet for her dead daughter. Rather than celebrating the runaway family’s passage to a new life of humanity and dignity, this double-faced banquet represents, in Ryken’s terms, a “rite of mourning” held “in honour of the deceased” (Ryken et al. 278).

Throughout the narrative, the same contrasting pattern prevails as descriptions of food and its common ascriptions absurdly reconfirm the disintegration of social ties rather than their development, thereby reasserting the dialectics of ingestion and appropriation. Nurture-related images are persistently commingled with violence, rape,⁴ betrayal, loss of kinship, blood, and ultimately death. Thematically, Morrison’s invocation of food imagery insinuates that hunger in the novel is “beyond appetite” (Morrison, *Beloved* 139), a sensation embodied by Beloved’s returning ghost. Upon her first appearance, Sethe and Denver notice that Beloved is “mighty thirsty” and “poorly fed,” drinking “as though she had crossed a desert” (61–2). This ravenous hunger triggers a process of gluttonous ingestion dramatised through Beloved’s appropriation of her mother’s body towards the end of the novel:

But the pain was unbearable when they ran low on food, and Denver watched her mother go without—pick-eating around the edges of the table and stove: the hominy that stuck on the

bottom; the crusts and rinds and peelings of things. Once she saw her run her longest finger deep in an empty jam jar before rinsing and putting it away. They grew tired, and even Beloved, who was getting bigger, seemed nevertheless as exhausted as they were. . . . Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved—her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long -- everything except her basket-fat stomach. (285)

Commenting on this scene, Rice points out that Beloved not only “preys on her mother” but is also haunted by “the fear of becoming a prey of others,” thereby mapping out the connection between Beloved's cannibalistic impulse and the slaves' dreadful journey across the Atlantic (“Who's Eating Whom” 108). Through reference to the slavers' practice of force-feeding and the slaves' fear of being “fattened up to be eaten,” Rice insinuates that Beloved both replicates and reverses the rumours and myths surrounding cannibalism throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (109).⁵ In fact, *Beloved* embodies the arguments, taboos, and vices Europeans deployed in order to validate their imperial ideology and the distinction they drew between the civilised and the barbaric. Through this character, Morrison ironically redeploys the “proslavery rhetoric” that praises the institution of slavery and its effectiveness in preventing “blacks from falling back into the bestiality from which they have been forcibly rescued” (Rice, “Who's Eating Whom” 116).

It is worth noting that this rebellious stance is also exhibited by Sethe whose self-starvation allows her to “renounce the fantasy of cannibalism” and rob it “of its omnipotence, its magic,” and above all its mythological thrust (Ellmann 52). If Sethe's enslaved body has been beaten, scarred, and marked in order to perform the law and “enact the body politic in the materiality of the natural body” (Roach 58), then her “starving body is . . . the living dossier of its discontents, for the injustices of power are encoded in the savage hieroglyphs of its sufferings” (Ellmann 17). Rather than reinforcing the mythological construction of the bestial

other, starving the tortured body evacuates its (cannibalistic, bestial) history, for “to starve is to renounce the past” and “void the body of its anteriority” (Ellmann 10). As if to provide an alternative to the “chokecherry tree” metaphor⁶ that pervades the early chapters of the narrative, Sethe’s self-starving act also represents an attempt to void and de-symbolise this already dysfunctional nutritional image⁷ and all the suffering for which it stands.⁸ As Hortense Spillers argues, it is the flesh, “that zero degree of social conceptualization,” rather than the body, that bears “the brush of discourse” and “the reflexes of iconography” (67). It is true that the “[captive] body bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside”; yet it is undeniable that these “hieroglyphics” are inscribed on and made visible by the flesh (Spillers 67). In the excerpt quoted above, Sethe’s flesh “fades” (Morrison, *Beloved* 285) and vanishes, palimpsestically wiping out the cultural text(s) inscribed on it and allowing a completely different text to emerge, namely the haunting experience of abjection, guilt, and expiation.

Interestingly, this aforementioned excerpt allows for an exploration of the psychological and diegetic relevance of nurture imagery in the novel. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Morrison’s depiction of Sethe’s emaciated body perfectly illustrates the concept of abjection. In Julia Kristeva’s terms, abjection is “one of those violent, dark revolts of being” triggered by the loss of the distinction between self and other (1). It is “a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up” (Kristeva 4). In fact, *Beloved*’s presence is the grotesque embodiment of Sethe’s abjection and self-loathing. Sethe’s sacrifice of sustenance underscores her acceptance of bartering her body for *Beloved*’s well-being, as well as her decision to pay the affective debt she owes her daughter.

The sense of the abject expressed by Sethe is doubled by her feeling of complicity in the rape scene and the literal and figurative writing up of her identity by Schoolteacher and his nephews (Morrison, *Beloved* 83). Commenting on this scene, Anne E. Goldman establishes a parallel between the theft of Sethe’s milk and the exploitation of the ink that she prepared for Schoolteacher in recording her own humiliation. In this context, Goldman points out how

[The] schoolteacher-slaveholder's gaze collapses Sethe's milky maternal product into the inky literary one, the black fluid with which he "writes up" this seizure of the mother's own fluid. And as the syntax of the phrase "writing it up" is suggestive of the child at the breast "sucking up" milk, so the very ink which the schoolteacher uses is equally a reminder of the conflation between reproduction and literary production, an indication that the locus for appropriation and circulation of the word is the maternal body of the woman slave. (324)

Accepting the fact that Sethe's body becomes "the locus for appropriation and circulation of the word," and thus of the narrative, it is fair to argue that her only strategy of biting back at the master is of depriving him of the tools he deployed in her own humiliation. At the surface level, Sethe starves her body in order to expiate for her guilt, notably her (unwilling) complicity in the act of scarring/"writing up" her slave identity. However, this barter amounts to substituting an unwillingly authored narrative with a narrative over which she has full authority and authorship, a gesture whereby she divests the white master of his former control over her body and over the narrative of her own identity.⁹ In this sense, Sethe's surrender of food in compensation for her usurped "white ink" (Goldman 324) is paralleled by the starving/wiping out of the scars on her flesh. Sethe's hunger and emaciation thus signal her symbolic re-appropriation of her milk and her ink, the tools by which her identity was re-sited within the bounds of subalternity and servitude. Sethe "expel[s]" herself, "spit[s] [her]self out," and "abject[s]" herself "within the same motion through which [she] claims to establish [her]self" (Kristeva 3). As such, her assertion of a distinctive "subjecthood (individual and collective) and 'identity' becomes possible but only at the price of abjection" (Raynaud 82).

It is worth noting that *Beloved* also exhibits this rebellious body habitus, for Sethe's barter of her body reinforces the sense of the abject in both characters. As Kristeva contends, abjection is "a state in between subject and object," wherein looms "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from

an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). Abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. . . . What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). If Sethe’s self-starvation and extreme emaciation evince her refusal to “[re]enact” the aberrations of the body politic (Roach 58), then Beloved’s grotesque “basket-fat” (Morrison, *Beloved* 285) belly not only disrupts this order but also divests it of its relevance. Rather than enacting the “exorbitant,” “[in]tolerable” and “[un]thinkable” (Kristeva 1) codes of the body politic, Beloved’s anomalous growth replicates, reverses, and thus brings into visibility the rotten politics of the body politic.

This mapping of the psychological onto the corporeal is equally effective for an insightful exploration of the dialectics of nurture and storytelling in Morrison’s narrative. The peculiar relationship between affective hunger and storytelling as spiritual sustenance is discernible in Beloved’s eagerness to unearth Sethe’s past and her childhood experiences:

“Tell me,” said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. “Tell me your diamonds.”

It became a way to feed her. . . . Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D . . . the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left.

But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison, *Beloved* 69)

This passage unravels the complexities of Sethe and Beloved’s psychologies. For Sethe, the act of recalling and retelling a traumatic past is itself traumatising, since it involves, in Dori Laub’s terms, a “re-living” of the

experience rather than “relief” from it (67). However, Sethe’s distaste for and in(di)gestion of her painful memories is resisted by Beloved’s greed for this past and the “profound satisfaction” the latter derives from it, which transform the experience of speaking the “unspeakable” into a source of “unexpected pleasure.” Likewise, bringing the past into the open compensates for Beloved’s original starvation, as “it bec[omes] a way to feed her” (Morrison, *Beloved* 69). This process of narrative feeding—a bitter parody of the perverse force-feeding slaves were subjected to during their horrendous voyage and a substitute for nursing—not only compensates Beloved for the milk of which she was deprived as an infant but also unburdens Sethe from her unfulfilled responsibility towards the slain daughter.¹⁰

In Eusebio L. Rodrigues’ sense, the “metaphors of food and hunger” that permeate the narrative make both “listener and reader” aware of “many slave hungers—for food, for things sweet, for an understanding of the past, for communion, for community, and, above all, for a form of sustenance slaves were deprived of, love” (156). Rodrigues’ use of the word “listener” is of paramount importance, for the listener in Morrison’s novel is not only external and extradiegetic but also intradiegetic,¹¹ hence Beloved’s aural intake of her mother’s oral sustenance. Indeed, the above-quoted excerpt mainly reveals that the dialectics of nurture and ingestion are more diegetic than anthropological, for “the extra-diegetic is,” in Genette’s terms, “perhaps always diegetic” (Genette 236). Whereas the extradiegetic mechanisms of appropriation no longer pervade blacks’ material existence, their heavy shadow still haunts the collective unconscious of the black community. In fact, the ubiquitous intradiegetic presence of these dynamics ultimately reveals that the boundary between “the world of which one tells” and “the world in which one tells” (Genette 236) is a shifting boundary that is constantly negotiated. As a listener to a narrative of massive psychic trauma, Beloved becomes a “participant [in] and [a] co-owner” (Laub 57) of Sethe’s childhood experiences, hence her voracious ingestion of Sethe’s testimony.

In this respect, it is evident that both listener and reader are ingested by Morrison’s and Sethe’s narratives so that the boundaries between the

diegetic and the extradiegetic are constantly blurred. In the concluding chapter, the text conspicuously mimics the ingestive behaviour of its characters:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind—wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her. (323)

Whether “disremembered,” exorcised, or completely ignored, Beloved’s spirit never ceases to remind the characters, as well as the reader, of the ghostly aspect of the slaves’ past. The comparison of a loneliness that can be “rocked” to a spectral loneliness that can neither be contained nor localized certainly evinces the power of the characters’ past beyond its limits, as well as its ability to ingest and haunt black memory and subjectivity rather than be digested and ultimately forgotten. Mapped onto the narrative, this haunting loneliness allows for recreating the past in the present and recontextualising history in the form of fiction. In this sense, the pastness of the characters’ spectral past confuses the boundaries between the fictional and the real, thereby drawing the real in its spectral universe. However, this narrative covetousness likewise remains insatiable. The obsessive repetition of the sentence “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 323–24) throughout this chapter betrays the text and the reader’s hunger for closure, while supplying a simulacrum of finality, thus inexorably parodying and perpetuating the novel’s ingestive patterns.

The blurring of boundaries between the intra-diegetic and the extra-diegetic is equally underlined by Beloved’s appropriation of Margaret Garner’s slave narrative¹² as well as some of the horrible chapters of the Middle Passage.¹³

I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked (248)

Beloved's appropriation of the narrative appears in the numerous disadjustments that permeate her account. The absence of punctuation as well as the frequent silences and gaps between past and present clearly reveal the narrator's dislocation from the present reality of the characters. Indeed, the fusion of Sethe and *Beloved's* disjointed past with fragmented episodes of the Middle Passage¹⁴ reveals the extent to which the history of the black community and their struggle against slavery has been distorted and disfigured by the master narrative of American history. Having been supplanted with narratives that promote the mythology of cannibalism and blacks' intellectual inferiority and allow the "strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters," this primal, visceral narrative was submerged in order for whites to construct "a history and a context" for themselves "by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 52–53). Resurrecting such a disjointed narrative from its ghostly grave thus re-claims a voice for blacks that helps them transcend this history-lessness and contextless-ness. In fact, *Beloved's* repetitive assertion that "all of it is now" and that "it is always now" denotes her attempt to grapple with a fragmented experience and a disjunctive collective subjectivity while also revealing the extent to which this subliminal area of blacks' existence can never be reduced to silence.

Another form of narrative appropriation is discernible in *Beloved's* ingestion of words throughout her narrative, as in the following passage:

I cannot lose her again my dead man was in the way like the noisy clouds when he dies on my face I can see hers she is going to smile at me she is going to her sharp earrings are gone the men without skin are making loud noises they push my own man through they do not push the woman with my face through she goes in they do not push her she goes in the little hill is gone she was going to smile at me she was going to a hot thing

They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water they break up the little hill and push it through I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face (250–51)

In this extract, the absence of a fixed space where the characters' movement can be traced illustrates de Certeau's definition of *asyndeton* and its textual and spatial practices.¹⁵ In de Certeau's sense, *asyndeton* reasserts the discontinuity of *Beloved's* intra-diegetic account, allowing her to "leap" from one thought to another and "open gaps" in the temporal continuum of black history (101). Through absorbing "the conjunctive" and "the consecutive," and replacing "totalities by fragments" (101), *Beloved* challenges the totalising grand narrative of American history with a mini-narrative of black history that helps excavate blacks' traumatic memories and reconstruct their fractured identity. *Beloved's* reference to bodies no longer "crouching" but rather "floating on the water" persistently plunges the reader into the slaves' primal horror of the Middle Passage, and more particularly, into a moment of tragic rupture and dislocation in which black consciousness has become frozen. Operating through what Morrison calls "literary archaeology" ("Site" 92) and unearthing the deeper recesses of blacks' existence, *Beloved's* mini-narrative disconnects the totality and coherence of the metanarrative of whites' supremacist identity, undoes its continuity, and undermines its plausibility and authenticity.

At the narratological level, the fragmentation of the narrative as well as the blurring of boundaries between self and other certainly complicate the reading process, thereby equally absorbing and involving the reader in the narrative situation. As a witness and listener to *Beloved's* testimony for a collective traumatic past, the reader must "*listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech," both "from behind" and "from within" the characters' inner beings (Laub 58; emphasis in original). The reader has to recognise and address the silence of the narrative in order to become the "enabler of the testimony, the one who triggers its initiation" (58), hence the dialectical relationship between the intra-diegetic and the extradiegetic.

The past's inscription of its presence beyond its spatial, temporal, and diegetic limits is more particularly asserted in the last paragraphs of the novel:

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

Beloved. (324)

In this passage, the reference to *Beloved's* footprints strongly recalls the description of the ghost's "tiny handprints in the cake" in the opening chapter, a detail that evinces the circular structure of the narrative and reaffirms the omnipresence of the past. On a deeper level, *Beloved's* non-localisable footsteps reveal this ghostly character's irredeemable dislocation and displacement. Being at once panoptic and invisible, familiar and forgotten, and thus symbolising the omnipresence of an alienated and "disremembered" past, these footprints remain elusive and non-localisable, thereby defying the narrative's attempt to mark them through absence. Hence their ability to ingest and appropriate

both physical and narrative spaces rather than be ingested and ultimately forgotten.

The vision is further complicated for the reader with the metafictional comments “it was not a story to pass on” (repeated twice), and “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 323–24), whereby the narrative calls attention to itself as a form of artifice. Such comments clearly recall Wolfgang Iser’s claims with regard to the reader’s active participation in narrative creation. In Iser’s sense, a literary text “only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader” (279). It is thus “the convergence of text and reader” that “brings the literary work into existence” (Iser 279). Morrison’s text implicitly engages the reader in an active relationship with the text. Not only do such self-reflexive comments draw the reader’s attention to the “unwritten” part of a text, but they also allow him to “set the work in motion,” a process that triggers the reader’s attention to the text’s “inherently dynamic character” and ultimately results “in the awakening of responses within himself” (Iser 280). Hence, Morrison’s text ingests its narratee within its fictive universe and confers upon him/her the privilege and “pleasure” of participating in its creation, “for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (Iser 280). By multiplying the levels of narration and creating a contest of voices throughout the narrative, Morrison’s novel reterritorialises her authority in the reader and engages him both intellectually and emotionally in the co-creation of the text.

It is worth noting that reader/audience engagement is inherent in African-American storytelling. Being “directly involved in the actualization and creation of a piece of oral literature,” the storyteller’s audience forms, in Ruth Finnegan’s terms, “an essential part of the whole literary situation” (12). Morrison’s intradiegetic and extradiegetic audiences, to quote Finnegan, “[can]not confine their participation to silent listening,” for “the actual literary expression” is greatly affected by their reactions (12–13). Morrison articulates this stance in the following: “I want . . . to make a truly aural novel, in which there are so many places and spaces for the reader to work and participate. I don’t want to close it, to stop the imagination of the reader, but to engage it in such a way

that he fulfils the book in a way that I don't" (Taylor-Guthrie 108), hence the combination of oral and written modes in the narrative of *Beloved*.

At the surface level, the novel reveals the extent to which the African-American experience of repression and dispersal is informed by the dialectics of appropriation. Indeed, the ingestive habitus not only informs the slaves' social life but also permeates and haunts the intimate spaces in which power relations under slavery are established, thereby reinforcing blacks' subjugation and identity de-formation. However, at a deeper level of interpretation, nurture dialectics in the narrative tend to reject and reverse the patterns of appropriation whereby such hegemonic social relations are maintained. In this context, Morrison's fusion of the sacred and the grotesque in dramatising *Beloved's* baptismal/funeral banquet evinces Morrison's transgressive reading of the official discourse of white Christianity. Through parodying and refracting the hegemonic foundations of white imperial culture at the social, historical, religious, and narratorial planes, Morrison's narrative underlines the way that covetousness for dominance and oppression is in(di)gested, repelled, and ultimately overthrown by the black community. In this respect, the dialectics of nurture and storytelling clearly underline the political proclivity of Morrison's narrative as well as its resistance to the official discourses that condone hegemonic race relations.

At the discursive level, Morrison's ingestion of her readers in the intradiegetic universe of the narrative highlights the importance of storytellers and their active audience in African-American storytelling as a form of resistance and survival. Avidly consuming the extradiegetic universe, and supplanting conventional forms of narrativisation with oral strategies, Morrison's o/aural narrative thus conspicuously articulates its indigestion of imperial discursive and literary patterns that have reduced blacks to invisibility. Through foregrounding its orality, her o/aural novel also effectively invalidates the idea that "African oral literature [is] a kind of written literature *manqué*" which is bereft of "the elaboration of wording" and mediated without "the particular stylistic devices peculiar to oral forms being made clear" through writing (Finnegan 15). The multiplicity of stories, tellers, listeners, and perspec-

tives hosted by Morrison's narrative belies the naïve assumption that oral literature is "undeveloped and primitive" (Finnegan 16). Morrison's *Beloved* not only demythologises the Western conception of orality but also helps her preserve, "even as she writes, the oral tradition at the heart of African American storytelling" (Durkin 543).

Notes

- 1 Sublimation is defined as the process which "makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life" (Freud 44).
- 2 In *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*, Rice further elaborates his argument, pointing out that "the cannibalistic nature of the other is almost always a myth, which, despite bearing little relation to historical reality contains and transmits significant cultural messages for those who maintain it" (125). More specifically, the mythological construction of the cannibal trope "allowed the whites, during the Atlantic slave trade, to promulgate an ideology of civilizing the primitive, of saving the African from an unchristian savagery" and was exploited by slavers themselves to reinforce their dominance over their slaves (125–26). Although this complex ideology was not related to a single race or tribe, in many cases it shaped "colonial and postcolonial relations between Africans and Europeans" much in the same way it affected "European attitudes to Africans" (123).
- 3 As a biblical symbol, food "offers pictures of God's providence, the pleasurable-ness of his creation and the proper ordering of life" (Ryken et al. 1028).
- 4 Sethe's mammary rape, a perverse form of nursing, constitutes a violent destruction of Sethe's relation with her children and an offence to motherhood.
- 5 Rice suggests that the returning ghost has literally "imbibed" the memory of the terrible voyage with her mother's milk, hence her internalization of the "frightening legacy" of the slave past. Rice contextualises this interpretation by referring to the slaves' suicide attempts and mutinous deportment during the voyage and the slavers' practice of force-feeding in order to avoid losing their "valuable cargo" ("Who's Eating Whom" 109).
- 6 The "chokecherry tree," a "relic" of Sethe's horrendous past at Sweet Home, refers to a large scar resulting from the severe punishment inflicted on her by Schoolteacher during her pregnancy. Sethe recounts the event to Paul D saying, "Schoolteacher made me open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (20).
- 7 Morrison's choice of the chokecherry tree, with its astringent fruit, its toxic leaves (DeGraaf 55), and its association with the verb "choke," reinforces her deconstructive deployment of nurture imagery. Through Sethe's self-starving act, the tree is infected with its own venom, thereby choking itself with the horren-

- dous burden of the memories it used to inject in the lives of people who have either visualised or made visible its hieroglyphs.
- 8 Being at once panoptic and invisible (visible and open to multiple interpretations to other characters, yet invisible to Sethe herself), the chokecherry tree not only reveals the black body as a site of inscription but also evinces the extent to which the black text can be silently inscribed yet remain unspeakable, hence reinforcing the characters' post-slavery traumas and their initial phobic attitude towards the past. So much ink has been spilled on the link between scarring, the black body as a site of inscription, and the "chokecherry tree" metaphor in Morrison's novel. Peach interprets Sethe's scar as the text of slavery that Schoolteacher and his nephews have literally written on her body (107–8). Harting likewise notes that the "chokecherry tree" is "the physical inscription of slavery on Sethe's back" and the mark of the dispossession of all slaves (33), while Durkin argues that the numerous scars inscribed on Sethe's flesh suggest "not only the construction, or, more accurately, the invention of black identity by whites, but also the creation of white identity, since identification of the 'other' is also an identification of the self" (544).
 - 9 Dwelling on the terrible episode, Sethe reflects on Schoolteacher's double usurpation and treachery, namely his exploitation of the ink she has made in writing a book about slaves: "He liked the ink I made . . . he preferred how I mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn't know that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions" (44). Sethe's guilty conscience and her obsessive self-reproach also haunt the closing pages of the narrative. Her lament "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (320) reveals her deep remorse at her indirect collusion in her own humiliation.
 - 10 In a previous conversation with Paul D, Sethe appears burdened with her unfulfilled duty towards Beloved. Rather than highlighting the horrors of rape and whipping inflicted by Schoolteacher and his nephews on Sethe, the repetitive lamentation "And they took my milk" (19–20) reveals Sethe's deep remorse for not being able to breastfeed her child.
 - 11 For a more insightful discussion of these terms, see Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (242–48).
 - 12 This narrative has been established as a reference point by the writer herself in some of her interviews. In her foreword to the Vintage edition of *Beloved*, which I am using here, she states it directly (*Beloved* xi). In her article, "The Poetics of Abjection in *Beloved*," Raynaud also confirms that Morrison has deliberately "undertaken the task of telling Margaret Garner's story" (75).
 - 13 "The Middle Passage," or the transatlantic slave trade, refers to the forced transportation of Africans "from the African coast to the slave markets of the West Indies" (Emert 30). During this voyage, the slave ships were packed with "men, women, and children" who were compelled to "live in unclean conditions," "al-

lowed only the minimum of food and water,” and exposed to the “brutality of crewmen and captain” (Emert 30). Such conditions resulted in the death of many slaves, who either died of epidemics, committed “suicide by jumping overboard,” or were killed by the crew in order to serve as “examples to others to prevent mutinies” (Emert 31).

- 14 In his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy argues that Morrison’s novels highlight “some of the strategies for summoning up the past devised by black writers,” strategies marked “by an imaginative proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding and lead back from contemporary racial violence, through lynching, towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage” (222).
- 15 In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau defines asyndeton as “the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences.” In spatial terms, asyndeton “selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits” and thus “practices the ellipsis of conjunctive *loci*” (101).

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