

# Mother's Milk, Collective Discourse, and Representation: Speakable/Unspeakable in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Slave narratives were published from about 1760 to 1865 in the United States, in order to testify to the harsh experience of the enslaved black people and to help realize their emancipation, according to *The Slave's Narrative* edited by Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. James Olney points out the “overwhelming sameness” in theme, content, and form in many of these narratives. The reason for that uniformity is that they were written or dictated and published with the support of white abolitionists, appealing mainly to the white reading public. Olney says as follows:

... unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of “sponsors,” and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition. How, then, could the narratives be anything but very much like one another? ... The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it; the content is a series of events and descriptions that will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery; and the form is a chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion. (154-56)

Marilyn Sanders Mobley says that Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) gets rid of such artificial uniformity of the slave narrative and makes the slave experience "more accessible to contemporary readers," exploring and representing "dimensions of slave life that the classic slave narrative omitted" (357-58). She is right, but there is another type of narrative in the novel which is never easily "accessible" to readers.

Many of the critics of *Beloved* seem to share the presupposition that Sethe is the protagonist of the novel and that the narrative by and about her is its main part, even though their critical standpoints vary. For example, Valerie Smith regards Sethe as "the central character of the novel" (345). Marianne Hirsch regards her as the protagonist and says as follows:

Morrison's novel, unlike the Oedipus story, *begins* with the mother, and allows *her* to *tell* her tale, to attempt to explain her incomprehensible act. . . . Sethe's murder of her as yet unnamed baby girl (whose milk had already been taken by the white masters at 'Sweet Home' and who, along with her three siblings, was about to returned into slavery), and Sethe's own attempts to explain it—to Paul D., to herself, to Denver, and to Beloved—are at the core of the novel. (6-7)

Hirsch also says that Morrison "has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction" (198). J. Brooks Bouson says that Morrison dramatized Sethe's pain and shame, and depicted "the nightmarish world inhabited by victims of trauma, using the device of the ghost to convey the power of trauma to possess and trap its victims" (134). Angelita Reyes argues the importance of Sethe's story as that of "reconciliation and spiritual redemption" (79). And once Stanley Crouch severely criticized *Beloved* as a sentimental soap opera in his essay entitled "Aunt Medea." However, what I would like to emphasize here is that Sethe is neither the center of the novel nor its heroine.

*Beloved* consists of the narrative of the present (1873-74) and the flashback

narrative of the past (1855-56), and although many of its characters alternately talk, the narrative by and about Sethe occupies the greater part of the novel. However, it is important to note that *Beloved* starts with the epitaph to “sixty million and more” victims of slavery. This number signifies those who died on the Atlantic Ocean in the middle passage from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. This epitaph indicates that the aim of the novel is to speak about and give voice to those unspeakable victims, and Beloved who was killed by her mother is one of them. If this novel wants to have some voices heard, it is Beloved's, not Sethe's. *Beloved* shows how for the dead, the meaning of their death has been grossly fabricated. Those who robbed their voices are not only their obvious enemies, but also their family, friends, and neighbors. Beloved's voice is multiply smothered and muted—first by the slaveowners, second by Sethe's killing her, third by her denial of her sin, and fourth by the community's, —including Sethe and Denver's—denial and forgetting of her. Therefore, what I would like to do in this paper is to examine whether *Beloved* succeeds in depicting the unspeakable, in other words, whether it can give them their own voices. For this novel proposes the problem concerning the possibility and/or impossibility of representation, that is, whether it is possible or not for the living to represent the unspeakable experiences unspoken of the dead.

### **The Discourses of Abolitionism and Feminism**

Margaret Garner killed her own daughter when she was brought to bay by slave catchers in Cincinnati in 1856. Her murder case occasioned wide popular attention at the time, but had been forgotten for a long time until it was used as the central motif in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. (As well known, while Morrison was editing a book of black vernacular history, she hit upon the article reprinted from the *American Baptist* magazine which published the account of the clergyman's visit to Margaret Garner in prison in 1856. See figure 1.) The anti- and pro-slavery discourses collided and the heated argument continued

From Middleton Harris, ed. *The Black Book*  
 Newspaper article reprinting the account of P. S. Bassett's visit to Margaret Garner which first  
 appeared on the *American Baptist*. Morrison used this article for the central motif of *Beloved*.

From the *American Baptist*.

**A VISIT TO THE SLAVE MOTHER WHO KILLED  
 HER CHILD.**

Last Sabbath, after preaching in the city prison, Cincinnati, through the kindness of the Deputy Sheriff, I was permitted to visit the apartment of that wretched woman, concerning whom there has been so much excitement during the last two weeks.

I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old, and observed that it had a large laceration on its forehead. I inquired the cause of the injury. She then proceeded to give a detailed account of her attempt to kill her children.

She said, that when the officers and slave-hunters came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other,—that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all—that with regard to herself, she cared but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.

I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal.

She then told the story of her wrongs. She spoke of her days of suffering, of her nights of unmitigated toil, while the bitter tears coursed their way down her cheeks, and fell in the face of the innocent child as it looked smiling up, little conscious of the danger and probable suffering that awaited it.

As I listened to the facts, and witnessed the agony depicted in her countenance, I could not but exclaim, Oh, how terrible is irresponsible power, when exercised over intelligent beings! She alludes to the child that she killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow, with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one's veins; yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother's love. She is about twenty-five years of age, and apparently possesses an average amount of kindness, with a vigorous intellect, and much energy of character.

The two men and the two other children were in another apartment, but her mother-in-law was in the same room. She says she is the mother of eight children, most of whom have been separated from her; that her husband was once separated from her twenty-five years, during which time she did not see him; that could she have prevented it, she would never have permitted him to return, as she did not wish him to witness her sufferings, or be exposed to the brutal treatment that he would receive.

She states that she has been a faithful servant, and in her old age she would not have attempted to obtain her liberty; but as she became feeble, and less capable of performing labor, her master became more and more exacting and brutal in his treatment, until she could stand it no longer; that the effort could result only in death, at most—she therefore made the attempt.

She witnessed the killing of the child, but said she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law,—for under similar circumstances she should probably have done the same. The old woman is from sixty to seventy years of age, has been a professor of religion about twenty years, and speaks with much feeling of the time when she shall be delivered from the power of the oppressor, and dwell with the Savior, where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.

These slaves (as far as I am informed) have resided all their lives within sixteen miles of Cincinnati. We are frequently told that Kentucky slavery is very innocent. If these are its fruits, where it exists in a mild form, will some one tell us what we may expect from its more objectionable features? But comments are unnecessary.

P. S. BASSETT,  
 Fairmount Theological Seminary,  
 Cincinnati, (Ohio.) Feb. 12, 1856.

figure 1

throughout the extraordinarily long period of the trial. Abolitionists and feminists defended Garner. Levi Coffin, abolitionist and underground railroad leader living in Cincinnati, recorded this murder case in detail in his memoir (figure 2). He wrote that John Jolliffe, Garner's attorney, argued for her defense,

From Levi Coffin: *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*



figure 2

saying: "It [the Fugitive Slave law] had driven a frantic mother to murder her own child rather than see it carried back to the seething hell of American slavery. This law was of such an order that its execution required human hearts to be wrung and human blood to be split" (561). Coffin repeatedly extols the strong will of the black people who "choose death rather than back to slavery."

Lucy Stone, feminist and abolitionist, also admired Garner's conduct, calling her "a heroic mother," and made a speech to the public of the court as follows:

... I told her [Margaret Garner] that [thousands of friends] were glad that **the child of hers was safe with the angels**. Her only reply was a look of deep despair—of anguish such as no work can speak. I thought then that **the spirit she manifest was the same with that of our ancestors to whom we had erected the monument at Bunker Hill—the spirit that would rather let us all go back to God than back to slavery**. (*The Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, February 14th, 1856; my emphasis)

Stone defended Garner, insisting that it was out of her deep maternal love that she killed her own daughter because she didn't want to pass her over to the cruel hand of slavery and that thus her child-murder was a form of protest against slavery in the United States. She argued that slavery is very sinful because it had compelled such an affectionate mother to kill her offspring "dearer than herself." Regarding Garner's child-murder as a result of maternal love, Stone was very glad that Garner's child would be safe with the angels in the heaven and identified this "spirit" Garner manifested with that of the founding fathers of the American Revolutionary War (figure 3).



Lucy Stone with daughter Alice, 1858 (*Library of Congress*)

From Andrea Moore Kerr: *Lucy Stone*

figure 3

Frederick Douglass also referred to this murder case in his speech just after the event: "See that slave mother at Cincinnati, preferring to slaughter the child of her bosom, with her own hand, to seeing that child flung into the hell of Slavery. Such love of Liberty, such burning hatred of Slavery, can only be kept under by acts of the cruelest aggression" (127-28). Again in 1857 he insisted that "we should not hesitate to extend our and others' life for the abolitions of the slavery if it is needed." He continues: "Hence, my friends, every mother who, like Margaret Garner, plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian Slavery, should be held and honored as a

benefactress" (204). Edward Bodwin, the white abolitionist in *Beloved*, remembers that he and the anti-slavery society he belonged to defended Sethe's infanticide and used this case as a booster for their movement: "The Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery" (260).

It should be noted that abolitionism and feminism used the same rhetoric for defending Garner, that is, the admiration of mother's love and the justification of murder for the cause of anti-slavery. And this rhetoric is seen in Sethe's words:

**She [Beloved] had to be safe and I put her where she would be. . . . I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. . . . Nobody will never get my milk no more except my own children. . . . Milk that belong to my baby. (200; my emphasis)**

However, Sethe's words are far from persuasive for Beloved because they are mere repetition or imitation of the institutionalized discourse of antislavery and feminism. Beloved is never satisfied or deceived by such artificial words. Especially when Sethe tried to insist on the authenticity and justness of her behavior and pretended to be "the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best" (242), Beloved expressed her intense fury by slamming and breaking things.

Sethe repeatedly emphasizes that she has a lot of mother's milk to give her children, which signifies her pride as a productive mother. Sethe gave birth to four children on the Sweet Home plantation and hence was a very valuable chattel for her owner. Her words of boasting her motherly productivity correspond with the slaveholders' standard for measuring the value of their slaves. In addition to that, Sethe emphasizes that she is the mother who deeply

loves her children, too. She is proud that she not only gave birth to and raised up her children, but had also set them free from slavery “by her own power.” (This is not true because she borrowed wisdom and help of the white girl, Amy Denver.) Because of that she feels herself “big, deep, and wide.” Sethe describes this proud feeling as “selfishness” or “selfish pleasure” (163). When she and her children were slaves, they were not Sethe's but the slaveowner's. But when they were set free, they became Sethe's. Frederick Douglass said in the speech cited earlier, “The very first element of Slavery is selfishness, extreme and bitter selfishness” (127). Also, Toni Morrison regarded the selfish pleasure of exercising absolute control over human beings as an important aspect of slavery in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). It should be noted that Sethe's feeling of possession of her children ironically reiterates this detestable element of slavery.

### **Difference between the Real Murder and the Fictional Murder**

Although Morrison wrote the story of infanticide based on the real child-murder case of Margaret Garner in 1856 as mentioned before, there are a lot of differences between these two murders. (That is, between the actual murder and the fictional one.) One of the differences is that Garner's murder had an eyewitness, and therefore the third person can testify to the event objectively. But Sethe's murder has no one who can testify to the murder except herself. It must be remembered that the child was killed not by a white persecutor, but by her own mother. (It has been already referred to that this fact could highlight the tragic character of the case and effectively promote the abolitionist cause. That is, this murder successfully highlighted the atrocity of slavery which had compelled a loving mother to kill her most beloved child.) When Sethe killed her child in the shed, there were five people there, namely, Sethe and her four children. (Sethe is the assailant and her four children are either killed, injured, or nearly injured by her.) Denver was three months old and too little to

remember what happened, Howard and Buglar went out of the house, as well as out of the novel, and never spoke about the event, and Beloved was dead. Therefore, the only person that can testify to the murder is Sethe. Although a lot of characters speak in this novel, the only person that can speak about what happened in the shed on that very day—the heart of the story—is Sethe.

Although Sethe is the only possible testifier of the murder, her testimony is far from effective because she is the assailant. The testimony of an assailant cannot be regarded as valid. Therefore, at the heart of this novel is a blank, for no person can tell what happened in the shed except the assailant. But is there really no one that can rightly bear witness to that event? If readers become very attentive, they will be able to find a testimony of the victim in this novel. That is the testimony of Beloved. She is “just one witness” of the event, according to Carlo Ginsburg's terminology. In Beloved's monologue covering pages 210-213, visual verbs appear as follows:

visual verbs	times
see/saw	19
look(ing)	4
watch(ing)	3
find	3
total	29

(*Beloved* pp. 210-13)

As many as twenty-nine visual verbs in these four pages of monologue make it plain that Beloved is the subject who looks. This means that Beloved “saw” everything that happened around her, but she had no proper way to convey what she saw to others. She says:

In the beginning I could **see** her I could not help her because the clouds were in the way in the beginning I could **see** her the shining in her ears she does not like the circle around her neck I know this I **look** hard at her so she will know the clouds are in the way I am sure she **saw** me I am **looking** at her **see** me she empties out her eyes. (211; my emphasis)

Although her sentences have no punctuation or chronological order and so appear incoherent, Beloved tries to communicate what she saw on the day when the slave catchers ( “the clouds” ) came to them and her mother killed her. Beloved asks questions: “All I want to know is why did she go in the water in the place where we crouched? Why did she do that when she was just about to smile at me?” (214). No matter how confused and lunatic this just one witness's testimony sounds, one has the responsibility to listen and respond to it.

The second important difference between the original murder case and the fictional account concerns the reason why the mother killed her daughter. In both murders, only the third of the four children was killed by their mother. Although the reason is never revealed in the novel, in the real murder case we are given some hints. For example, Levi Coffin recorded that Mary, the girl who was killed, was “much lighter in color than herself [Garner], light enough to show a red tinge in its cheeks” and that she was “almost white, a little girl of rare beauty” (563). Thus observing, Coffin gave a hint about why Garner killed Mary. (His words that Garner killed Mary because “she probably loved her the best” may sound illogical to contemporary readers, but was quite logical in the light of anti-slavery sentiment at that time. The strange and paradoxical rhetoric prevailed related to this case. That is, the deeper one loves her/his children, the farther she/he has to place them from slavery. The conclusion derived from this thinking is that the safest place for them is the heaven.) Lucy Stone spoke to the court public, insinuating Archibald Gaines' (Garner's master's) paternity of Garner's children:

**The faded faces of the negro children tell too plainly to what degradation female slaves submit.** Rather than give her little daughter to that life, she killed it. If in her deep maternal love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right to do so? (*The Cincinnati*

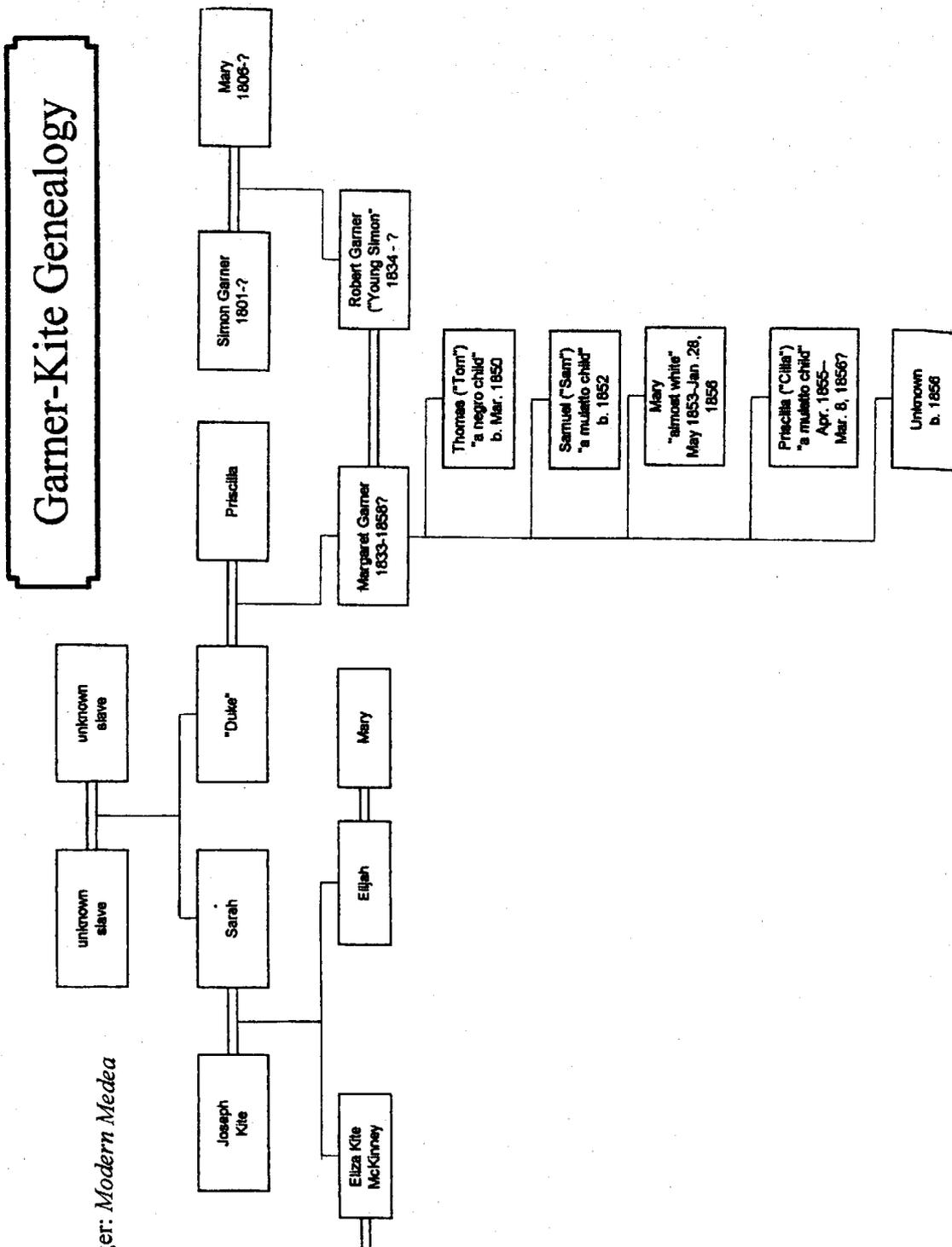
*Daily Gazette*, February 14, 1856; my emphasis)

Steven Weisenburger does a thorough investigation of Margaret Garner's case in his book *Modern Medea* (1998), where he affirms that Gaines had sexual access to her and therefore was the real father of her children and that Mary's complexion is the lightest of all. Thus Weisenburger found an answer to his "main mystery: Why did Margaret take her daughter's life?" (12). (Weisenburger investigates a genealogy of the Garner family. See figure 4.)

In contrast to the real case, in Morrison's novel *Beloved*'s complexion was not light but very black, and Sethe's former master didn't have sexual access to her. The main mystery why she killed *Beloved* is never clarified in this wordy text. Sethe speaks a lot about her mother's milk, her anguish, her pride, her justice...all about herself, while cunningly avoiding this most important question thrown by the daughter she had killed. The novel's center is Sethe's murder of her daughter, but no one explains the main reason for it. The heart of the novel is blank. All Sethe explained to *Beloved* is that she killed her because she loved her children, never saying because she loved her the best: "The best thing she was, was her children" (251). From this we know that *Beloved* is the name given to the child who is not loved. This was already intimated in the epigraph of this novel:

I will call them my people,  
Which were not my people;  
And her beloved,  
Which was not beloved.                      Romans 9:25

Sethe's third child was not given her proper name, but only called "crawling already? baby (or girl)." Many characters and animals in this novel have their proper names except some white characters, such as "schoolteacher." If



From Steven Weisenburger: *Modern Medea*

figure 4

naming is a symbolic act of love, "Beloved" is a name which reminds us of the lack of love. For although Sethe wanted to have the words "Dearly Beloved" engraved on her daughter's grave, she couldn't endure the sex with the mason for ten minutes more. She "thought it would be enough...to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust" (5), but it was not enough to satisfy/pacify her daughter she killed. Therefore "Beloved" is the name of the person whom one doesn't love enough, but abuses and victimizes, and later gives that name as an excuse.

### **Possibility/Impossibility of Representation**

As was argued in former chapters, we have to read Sethe's heroic and sentimental narrative critically and listen to the voice which is liable to be extinguished by her wordiness. There is no one who talks about "crawling already? baby" except Sethe who is armed with the collective discourse of abolitionism and feminism. How can the baby's pleasure, sorrow, and anguish be known and spoken of? Her sorrow and anger were united with the voices surrounding 124, that is, those of the enslaved black people relentlessly killed and left unknown and unnamed:

Out on Bluestone Road he [Stamp Paid] thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. (172)

This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girl who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring. (181)

Beloved's incomprehensible monologue stands in contradistinction to the linear and teleological narrative of classic slave narratives or Sethe's confident and impassioned narrative. Beloved's fragmented words or phrases paradoxically represent the limit or impossibility of representation. "A hot thing," a phrase she repeats, represents the pain, sorrow, hunger, thirst, and anguish of enslaved black people, but at the same time it signifies the limitation, even impossibility, of representing them.

Sethe, the courageous and resistant mother, is definitely "correct" and nobody has the right to blame her except Beloved because she was killed by her without any fault on the latter's side. Sethe's narrative was connected with the grand narratives of abolitionism, motherhood, the rights of African Americans, and even the national cause of the United States which evaluates freedom and human rights. Beloved has to confront not only her mother's persuasion but also such powerful discourses. Eventually Beloved is defeated, abandoned, and expelled. Those who abandoned her were not only her enemies, but also her mother, sister, and people in the community. People's negligence to inform the approach of slave catchers indirectly triggered Sethe's murder of Beloved, and on top of that they helped to get rid of Beloved from their town. A community, whether big or small, always stands on the side of the living, not the dead. After getting rid of Beloved from the town, the people go back to their happy everyday life.

Referring to the deceased of Hiroshima, Lisa Yoneyama writes how the victims are marginalized as "the other" of the nation state while at the same time being made to function as the "constitutive outside" that is indispensable for the system. The victims of the genocide are simultaneously nationalized and marginalized, and thereby get un-individualized. Yoneyama says as follows:

Social and cultural systems have constantly reconstructed the dead as their Others, as that which is suppressed yet essential for existence. The dead have

been left behind in the linear course of time; having aided in the nation's development, social and political progress, revolution, or the awakening of humankind, they are remembered only as those who have "passed away." In the often-heard cliché— "the precious sacrifice of those victimized by the atomic bombings have laid a firm foundation for Japan's postwar peace and prosperity," or words to that effect—the atom bomb dead are endowed with teleological meaning. They are understood to have contributed to the uninterrupted history of national progress. (143)

Likewise, the death of the victims of slavery are forgotten and marginalized as the other, while at the same time being made to function as the constitutive outside of the nation state. Behind the national design of historicization, individual voices of the dead are forgotten. Morrison called it "national amnesia." Therefore, she said, she tried to "make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S" (*Conversation with Toni Morrison* 257).

In Claude Lanzman's film *Shoah* (1985), Simon Srebnik, one of two survivors and witnesses of the Chelmno extermination camp, locates the place where the crematorium was, which burned thousands of people 40 years before, but there is no sign of it now. He looks at the wind, tree, and sky, which are the same as at that time, and says: "It's hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here. A lot of people were burned here. Yes, this is the place. . . . the flames reached to the sky" (3). If you want to know the existence of the victims who died unknown and unnamed, the process of mystical unification with them is needed. If you want to listen to the voice of "the disremembered and unaccounted for," you have to listen to the sound of the wind:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what 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. (*Beloved* 275)

I have to go back to my original question, that is, whether *Beloved* succeeds in depicting the unspeakable and whether it gives them their own voices. Sethe's wordy and abundant speech can extract compassion from readers. On the other hand, *Beloved's* speech is so illogical and meaningless that readers will find it only irritating. Those who were killed unreasonably or experienced the terror beyond reason and understanding, cannot communicate their experience to others, because their experience is unthinkable and unimaginable. Never understanding their message, people throw them back again into silence and solitude. Thus the dead are killed twice. The process of mourning is one for the living to overcome and forget the deceased. *Beloved* is not the story of Sethe's redemption and healing, but rather it represents how such redemption can be brought from forgetting and silencing the dead. At the end of the novel, losing her mother's face again, *Beloved* goes back into silence and anonymity. "A naked woman with fish for hair" whom a little boy saw (267) is the later figure of *Beloved*: this portrays her solitude, speechlessness, and monstrosity which the former two fabricate.

Berel Lang has said that fiction cannot speak about holocaust. He may be right, but it can surely be said that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of the important attempts to cope with such impossibility. *Beloved* appeals for the necessity to represent the disappearing voices of the dead, and at the same time represents its impossibility by placing blankness at the center of the novel.

\*On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the opera *Margaret Garner* directed by Richard Danielpour was performed in Cincinnati, Ohio. Toni Morrison wrote the libretto of this opera. Real Margaret Garner continued to live after the event and in *Beloved* Sethe stepped into the life with Paul D, but in this opera, Margaret hangs

herself kicking off the stool herself in the ending. This ending would mean that Toni Morrison reconfirmed what she intended to say in the novel by this opera's ending. That is, to see the novel *Beloved* as a story of happy redemption is misreading the text, for, as mentioned above, blankness and speechlessness reside at its center.

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Thomas Satterwhite Noble's 1867 painting, *Margaret Garner* (a.k.a. *The Modern Medea*), depicts the tragic scene of Margaret Garner's recapture. The painting, donated by Procter & Gamble, is on display in the Slavery to Freedom Gallery at Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.