UNREAD LETTERS, SUBLIME GIFTS: THE SLAVE SUBLIME IN SELCECTED TONI MORRISON NOVELS

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Unread Letters, Sublime Gifts: The Slave Sublime in Selected Toni Morrison Novels* by Alicia Rae Barnett, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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UNREAD LETTERS, SUBLIME GIFTS: THE SLAVE SUBLIME IN SELCECTED TONI MORRISON NOVELS

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This thesis demonstrates the ways in which Toni Morrison incorporates the non-linguistic code of the slave sublime, a term coined by Paul Gilroy in his 1993 study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, through the use of music, dance, colors, and scars within *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*. The slave sublime enables her characters to create solidarity and foster healing from the traumatic past of slavery and its aftermath for themselves as well as the African-American community without reinforcing the hegemonic language. Highlighting the usage and function of the slave sublime in Morrison's novels may shed light on the way in which contemporary African-American novelists struggle with the tension between writing in the hegemonic language that is saturated with a history of oppression of the people they seek to reconstruct and the desire to tell these stories that defy direct representation.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis

Chair, Thesis Committee

5/19/15
Date

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Communicating Non-Linguistically: Toni Morrison and the Slave Sublime

This thesis highlights the use of what Paul Gilroy describes as the "slave sublime" in his 1993 study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* within Toni Morrison's novels *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*. The "slave sublime" is a non-linguistic code created by African-Americans in response to the traumas of slavery and the oppressive nature of the hegemonic language of their masters. The goal of the use of the slave sublime is to communicate traumas that defy direct representation in language, and to create solidarity and a space for healing from this traumatic past for the African-American community that exists outside of the oppressive hegemonic language. Though Gilroy emphasizes song, dance, and music as the key aspects of this non-linguistic code, this thesis extends Gilroy's notion of the slave sublime to include other modes of non-linguistic communication used by slaves and their descendants such as reading non-linguistic signs found in nature, colors, and scars. In order to navigate the nightmarish new world, slaves and their descendants must supplement their knowledge of the hegemonic language with knowledge of the codes of the slave sublime which are passed on within an African-American communal context. Community is an essential element when discussing the slave sublime, as it is through the community that the individual learns to decipher these codes and within the community that the individual can communicate the unspeakable traumas experienced during slavery and its aftermath in order to find healing and redemption from this painful past. Redemption from the painful

past of slavery occurs when the individual confronts the hardships and hard choices they were forced to make because of slavery's perverse moral code, and then shares these experiences within an African-American community of active listeners who understand the codes the individual must use to communicate these traumas. By sharing these stories within an African-American communal context, the individual may gain acceptance into a loving community, find forgiveness from those they may have been forced to hurt, and can potentially overcome a horrific past and reintegrate into society. Though some aspects of the horrors of slavery and its aftermath cannot be fully articulated even with the non-linguistic code of the slave sublime, the impression of these unreadable messages subliminally transcends linguistic, spatial, and temporal boundaries and members of the African-American community continue to feel the haunting presence of these indecipherable messages that are transmitted using the slave sublime. The knowledge that this message exists causes the individual within the African-American community to engage with the repressed traumas of racial terror. This individual engagement within an African-American communal context to help the individual decode the hidden traumas communicated with the code of the slave sublime leads to healing for both the individual as well as the community. The non-linguistic code of the slave sublime along with its key aspects, goals, and communal requirements in historical reality are a major facet within the corpus of Toni Morrison's works and feature prominently within the three novels this thesis will examine.

For Gilroy, the development of the slave sublime is inextricably bound to the

horrors of slavery and the traditions of black music. As Gilroy notes, the link between the inexpressible horrors of slavery and black music as a tool to begin to articulate these horrors was first made explicit by W.E.B. Du Bois in his landmark 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois states that within African-American spirituals, or "sorrow songs," we can hear "the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace and hear the signs of development. . . . Such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate. Words and music have lost each other and new cant phrases of dimly understood theology have displaced the older sentiment" (157-9). Du Bois thus explains the foundation of the slave sublime in music as a mode of non-linguistic communication that seeks to articulate inexpressible sorrows within a communal context. Gilroy further clarifies how he builds on Du Bois' argument in his 1993 book *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*:

> Du Bois is the first cultural historian of the black Atlantic world who presents black music as a mode of meta-communication that extends and transcends the limitations of merely linguistic signifying practice. Music and its attendant rituals provide the most important locations where the unspeakable and unwriteable memory of terror is preserved. (164)

African-Americans turned to music in order to communicate not only "the unspeakable" abuses of slavery, but also in order to create solidarity within the community by crafting plans for escape, critiquing their masters, and encouraging members of the community to stay strong despite subjugation. Though the "memory of terror" may be "unspeakable,"

meaning it cannot be expressed by language, these memories are not unsayable, as they can be communicated non-linguistically through music or other codes. The need to create these codes within the music stems from both the denial of and the oppression by the hegemonic language of the masters. This connection is again highlighted by Gilroy who argues that "racially subordinated people who are denied access to particular cultural forms (like literacy) developed [song] as a means of transcendence and as a type of compensation for very specific experiences of unfreedom. . . Survival may require the mastery of specifically encoded linguistic and verbal expression in addition to command of the written word" (*Black Atlantic* 123). In this way Gilroy highlights the importance of not only learning to understand the hegemonic language, but also supplementing this knowledge with knowledge of encoded expressions. Toni Morrison also shows her awareness of the transcendence of music within the African-American community and highlights this within her fiction. Morrison, in an interview with Paul Gilroy published in *Small* Acts, makes this connection between black music and extra-linguistic communication explicit when she states: "Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art, above all in the music . . . My parallel is always the music, because all of the strategies of the art are there. All of the intricacies, all of the discipline" (181). Both Morrison and Gilroy seek to emphasize the importance of music within African-American communicative and creative acts and to demonstrate the way in which music is part of a larger tradition of achieving freedom and creating solidarity through non-linguistic modes of communication within the African-

American community.

It is from this link between oppression and music's ability to transcend mere words in order to communicate inexpressible suffering while also providing a space for healing that Gilroy arrives at the term "slave sublime." This transition from black music to the slave sublime can be seen as Gilroy cites "the power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or collective, defensive or transformational" (*Black Atlantic* 36). Music's ability to communicate information, organize consciousness, and create subjectivity for both the individual and the collective for purposes of self-preservation as well as transformation of a traumatic history into a potential space for healing are all integral aspects of his definition of the slave sublime. This emphasis on self-preservation also connects Gilroy's definition of the slave sublime to Edmund Burke's conception of the sublime in his 1756 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke asserts in his text that "the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation. That it is therefore one of the most affecting we have. That its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress" (159). Thus, Gilroy, in his monumental 1993 book *The Black Atlantic*, modifies aspects of Burke's sublime when he defines the slave sublime "as politics of transfiguration" and an attempt to form a community "under the very nose of the overseers" (37). The formation of this community is "magically made audible in the music itself" and by necessity must

> exist on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because mere words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth. (37)

The slave sublime is marked by a continual striving for self-preservation and solidarity in the face of unspeakable terrors. In order to form a community that moves away from experiences which defy direct representation in the hegemonic language of their masters, members of the African-American community must create a meaningful mode of communication that "strive[s] continually to move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual, and discursive" in order to "repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable" (Gilroy 37-8). It is here that we see another parallel between Burke and Gilroy, as both emphasize that "a mode of terror, or of pain, is always the cause of the sublime" (Burke 258). Gilroy makes it clear, however, and this is crucial, that the slave sublime did not wane in significance to the African-American community as slavery was abolished. Rather, "the memory of slavery, and various attempts to make redemptive journeys back to the barracoons and slave ships is [an] essential motif involved in the black Atlantic's critical response to modernity's dubious privileges. The artistic impulse to revisit this ineffable, sublime terror raises some pressing ethical issues" (*Small Acts* 163-4). While Gilroy's assertion that the slave sublime functions as a critique of modernity can only be gestured toward within the confines of this thesis, it is important to note the necessity for members of the African-American community to "revisit this ineffable, sublime terror" of slavery and its aftermath and to do so by employing the non-linguistic

modes of communication that offer a way to express the unspeakable and provide a space for healing for African-Americans and their ancestors.

Few authors have successfully revisited "this ineffable, sublime terror" of slavery and its aftermath while focusing on non-linguistic modes of communication within an African-American communal context to the extent that Toni Morrison has. In their conversation reproduced in *The Black Atlantic*, both Gilroy and Morrison emphasize the necessity of engaging with the traumatic past of slavery and its aftermath by "drawing upon and reconstructing the resources supplied to them by earlier generations of black writers," chief among these resources being the slave sublime, and to perform "a deliberate and self-conscious move beyond language in ways that are informed by the social memory of earlier experiences of enforced separation from the world of written communication" (222). This "deliberate and self-conscious move beyond language" is informed by the code of the slave sublime within Morrison's works. The use of the slave sublime within *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*, can be seen in the incorporation of song, dance, rhythms, scars, and colors as an attempt to communicate the inexpressible. Within all of these texts, the necessity of using the slave sublime is foregrounded by an emphasis on the oppressive nature of the hegemonic language and its inability to convey the traumas experienced by both enslaved and freed members of the African-American community. The slave sublime, then, is able to communicate some of these experiences without reinforcing the power of the hegemonic language while also serving as a tool to strengthen the bonds between individuals within the African-American community who

are able to articulate what was previously indescribable in mere words alone. The slave sublime highlights the failure of *any* language to express the horrors of slavery, as this non-linguistic mode of communication acknowledges its own inability to fully express the traumas sustained by the racial terrors of slavery and its aftermath. It is in this failure to fully convey the traumas of slavery that we again see a connection between Gilroy and 18th-century notions of the sublime, as Burke links the sublime to "infinity," while Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgement* claims that "the sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (98). It is the formlessness and boundlessness of the sublime within the slave sublime that allows for these indecipherable messages to transcend linguistic and temporal barriers to still offer healing to the African-American community. This is evinced within Morrison's works through the use of systematic silences and gaps inherent in her novels, which gestures toward the unread letters of those lost to the traumatic experiences in the transition from being African to African-American. Though these letters are destined to remain unread, Morrison maintains in her fiction that knowing that these messages are sent and engaging with these letters outside of language has the potential to sustain and heal the African-American community.

To begin this exploration of Morrison's usage of the slave sublime I turn to her 2008 novel *A Mercy* and focus on Florens and her journey from slavery to autonomy using the slave sublime. Set in 1690, *A Mercy* represents the earliest period in African-American history, the moment which signals the dividing line between being a free

African and an enslaved African-American, and the moment of "temporal and ontological rupture" (Gilroy 222). As such, Florens' narrative serves as an origin story for both African-American identity and, by extension, the origin of the slave sublime. The incorporation of the slave sublime in this novel thus "reveal[s] the limitations and assumptions of the American vocabulary" and creates a space for healing (Dobbs 568). The limitations of the hegemonic language are made apparent through Florens' ambivalent relationship to letters. Though Florens is able to read and write, the hegemonic language is still used as tool of her oppression and does not grant her the liberation she desires. This failure necessitates alternative modes of communication in the form of the slave sublime which Florens attempts to use in her quest to belong to an African-American community and gain an identity. Florens supplements her knowledge of the hegemonic language with an attempt to read non-linguistic signs, but is unable to interpret the majority of these signs because she lacks community; without her mother or another African-American nurturer, Florens is unable to decipher the codes of the slave sublime and as a result is unable to find healing within the African-American community she sought to create with her lover the blacksmith. This absence of community also underscores the lack of song and dance, key features of the slave sublime, within Florens' narrative. Despite this lack, Florens recognizes that she has misread many signs during her quest for community, the most formative of which is the figurative unread letter sent to her by her mother, and attempts to respond to this lack by sending an unread letter of her own. The unread letters of mother and daughter represent the unsayable yet

transcendent aspects of the slave sublime. These letters defy the limitations of the hegemonic language through their incorporation of the slave sublime, and though they can never be read, the knowledge that each woman has a message for the other sustains both mother and daughter despite subjugation and serves as a testament to the resilience of the African-American community which reverberates throughout the core of Morrison's work.

The oppression of the hegemonic language, the necessity of interpreting non-linguistic signs in order to find freedom and a community, and the failure of all discourses to adequately convey the traumas of slavery are all crucial aspects of Toni Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved.* In the second chapter of this examination I trace these elements from the inaugural moment of racial terror in *A Mercy* to the era of institutionalized chattel slavery and Reconstruction depicted in *Beloved.* The novel hinges on Sethe and Paul D's (in)ability to overcome the traumatic experiences they have faced by communicating these horrors that defy direct representation through the slave sublime in order to heal themselves as well as the newly freed African-American community. This text, like *A Mercy*, highlights the dangers of the hegemonic language and its failure to grant the enslaved subject autonomy in order to highlight the importance of using the non-linguistic codes of the slave sublime within the African-American community. To combat the abuses of the hegemonic language, Sethe and Paul D rely on the codes of the slave sublime, such as interpreting the non-linguistic signs of nature, song, dance, music, colors, and scars. The use of these tools shows the way in which the

African-American community has adapted meaningful modes of communication that exist outside of the dominant discourses that have been used as tools of oppression against them. Morrison, however, as she does in *A Mercy*, also shows the limitations of the slave sublime in her representation of the Middle Passage in order to show that by necessity, some aspects of black experience will always remain ineffable. Ultimately, through the character of Sethe, Morrison shows that redemption from a painful past is still possible, but can only be achieved through the code of the slave sublime rooted in the African-American community.

In the concluding chapter I continue to trace the slave sublime into the twentieth century in Morrison's novel *Jazz*. Unlike *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, *Jazz* takes place well after slavery has been abolished. Significantly, however, the main characters of the novel, Joe Trace and his wife Violet, as well as the many inhabitants of the City, are still haunted by the traumas of slavery. As such, the slave sublime is still an essential aspect of the characters' quests for healing and integration into their new urban community. Set in the mid-1920's, *Jazz* highlights the relationship between black music and the slave sublime as music within the text functions as a code that exists outside of the realm of language and is used to create solidarity within the African-American community to express what is otherwise unrepeatable. *Jazz* also highlights aspects of the slave sublime, such as sound and rhythm, on a structural level through the slippery narrator of the text who continually, and ironically, rebukes the hegemonic language in favor of using the codes of the slave sublime. In addition to the use of music, sound, and rhythm to highlight the necessity of

using the slave sublime to communicate the inexpressible, *Jazz* also incorporates the importance of reading non-linguistic signs found in nature as well as scars. Joe Trace brings with him to the City his skills of hunting in which he relies not on reading the many signs in the urban setting, but on reading and tracing the signs that exist outside of language, such as the scars on Dorcas' face. Reading the signs of nature is also crucial to Joe's quest to find Wild, the mother he has never met. Joe's struggle to create a community within the City can only come to a conclusion through his engagement with the haunting absence of his mother who embodies the slave sublime. Wild hovers on the edge of the community and on the edge of language itself, reminding members of the African-American community of the unsayable horrors of slavery and its aftermath they tried to repress upon moving to the City. Wild's actions are always represented as non-linguistic in the text as her encounters with others only occur through her "babygirl laugh," the "tap of her fingertips," and the "scrap of song" Joe hears from the distance (177). Joe's search for Wild is facilitated through the codes of the slave sublime and is analogous to the need of the African-American community to engage with the repressed past of slavery before one can find healing within the new urban setting. In order to engage with this past, one must decode and communicate through the slave sublime in order to convey and comprehend the unsayable. The narrator of *Jazz* foregrounds the importance of this engagement through her own search for Wild. Through this confrontation with Wild, the narrator gains redemption from her perceived narrative shortcomings by becoming the recipient of the unreadable letters from Wild which are

transmitted using the transcendent nature of the slave sublime. Much like the redemption alluded to in the conclusion of *A Mercy* and offered by Baby Suggs and the community in *Beloved*, healing can only occur through a confrontation with this unspeakable past and a rebirth into the African-American community using the codes of the slave sublime.

All three of these texts, then, expose the abusive power of the hegemonic language and its inability to convey the traumas of slavery. This oppressive power of language and its subsequent failure to articulate the psychic wounds caused by the racial terrors of slavery and its aftermath forces slaves and their descendants to supplement their knowledge of the hegemonic language with knowledge of the non-linguistic codes of the slave sublime in order to heal the individual as well as the community. Aspects of the slave sublime, such as song, dance, music, rhythm, colors, and scars, all feature prominently within the three novels I discuss and all of these features gain significance only insofar as they relate to the African-American community. The codes of the slave sublime falter without a community to teach the individual how to decipher these codes and without a community to understand these codes. Despite the ability of the slave sublime to articulate what is otherwise inexpressible, all three texts also acknowledge that some aspects of individual experience, especially those who lost their lives to the ineffable, sublime terrors of slavery and its aftermath, can never be fully articulated. These unread letters are thus represented in these novels through systematic gaps and silences within the text. Though these letters outside of language are destined to remain unread, the knowledge that these letters have been sent, and that the descendants of slaves

are the recipients of these transcendent letters transmitted using the code of the slave sublime, causes the members of this community to engage with the repressed past of racial terror, and through this engagement, a space opens up for healing for the individual and the community.

Chapter 1. "Come Inside this Talking Room": *A Mercy* and the Slave Sublime

In this chapter I focus on Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* with a concentration on the main character Florens and her journey from slavery to autonomy through the slave sublime. After Florens is given away by her mother to an Anglo-Dutch trader named Jacob Vaark, she struggles to navigate the new world as she searches for a loving community first within the community of enslaved women on Vaark's property, and then with a free African-American blacksmith. After she is rejected by the blacksmith, Florens returns to Vaark's land with all hope of belonging to a community dismantled. This failure leads Florens to inscribe her story upon the very walls of her master's garish third home in an attempt to create a dialogue with both her lost mother and the blacksmith. It is highly significant that Florens can write, but her relationship to letters is represented as ambivalent. Florens' education is helpful, but grants her neither freedom nor autonomy. Florens must supplement her knowledge of the hegemonic language of the masters with the code of the slave sublime in order to make sense of her world and create a new identity for herself. In opposition to the hegemonic language of her masters, Florens attempts to read non-linguistic signs during her journey and incorporates these signs into her story. It is also important to note the absence of some aspects of the slave sublime, such as song and dance, within the world Florens inhabits. This absence is symptomatic of the absence of an African-American community in the

novel as well as the absence of Florens' mother. The absence of a strong communal presence and the mother tongue is hugely significant to both the novel and discussions of the slave sublime. Florens' desire to tell her story, coupled with the inability to tell her story to her intended audience, highlights the unread letters that are also part and parcel of the slave sublime. These unread letters emphasize the failure of *any* language to express the horrors of slavery. The failed communication between Florens and the blacksmith and Florens and her mother reflects not only the ineffable nature of the slave sublime, but also emphasizes the fragmentation of both identity and language necessitated by the enforced transition from African to African-American. As a result of the collusion of language and white hegemony's control, Florens must incorporate the slave sublime in the form of learning to read non-linguistic signs into the "talking room" where she carves her story onto the walls of Vaark's property in order to pass on a story that defies direct representation and to transform her tale into a potential space of healing for the African-American community (Morrison 188).

My interest in *A Mercy*, which is set in 1690, stems from its representation of the earliest period in African-American history, the moment which signals the dividing line between being a free African and an enslaved African-American, and the moment of ontological rupture. Valerie Babb argues that *A Mercy* "is an American origins narrative that re-places the racial, gender, and class complexities lost in the creation of a canonical narrative that sought to privilege the few over the many" (147). In this way, Florens'

narrative serves as an origin story not only for the creation of an African-American identity, but also, by extension, the origins of the slave sublime. As Gilroy explains, the slave sublime was created as a direct result of its entanglement with "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). Due to the fact that these horrors "surpass understanding," alternative modes of storytelling must be adapted in order for these (hi)stories to be told without subjecting them to the oppressive conventions of the hegemonic language of the masters. Through the incorporation of the slave sublime, Florens is able to "reveal the limitations and assumptions of the American vocabulary. . . opening it up to the syntax and stories of African American culture and history" (Dobbs 568).

(Un)Learning to Read and Write

Though much of this chapter focuses on the importance of the slave sublime, it is also important to note that the hegemonic language heavily influences the creation of the slave sublime and has both positive and negative influences on the lives of African-Americans. Florens' ability to write is central to the novel, but her relationship to letters is represented as ambivalent. The power associated with Florens' ability to read and write the master's language is negated at every turn by the oppressive nature of the hegemonic language. Though her mother believes that learning to read and write are crucial survival

skills her daughter must learn, the language of the oppressors can never fully offer autonomy to the enslaved subject. In the novel's final chapter, we hear Florens' mother describe the power of learning the language of the masters: "I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way. . . . [Reverend Father] believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in learning" (Morrison 191). Her mother rightly believes that mastering the language of the master is essential to navigating this nightmarish new world. She also recognizes that the hegemonic language can be manipulated to suit purposes outside of the intentions of the dominant class. Though learning this language may not help them love their master's god more, learning is essential to gaining autonomy. Note the fact that her mother believes "there is magic in learning," and does not state that this "magic in learning" is limited to learning the master's language. This failure to specify leaves an opening for the importance of learning to use the slave sublime to navigate the world and to "somehow someday" gain a sense of autonomy.

Florens also recognizes the power of learning. In the opening chapter, Florens describes learning to read as a subversive act and one that gives her a sense of pride: "When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas" (Morrison 7). In this way, Florens uses her mastery of language to distinguish herself from her rival brother. She believes that learning to read

makes her more valuable, but despite being the superior student, Florens believes that her mother still chooses her brother over her.

In opposition to the potential power of language, *A Mercy* also highlights the oppressive nature of the hegemonic language through the incorporation of Rebekka Vaark's letter which authorizes Florens' passage during her search for the blacksmith. This letter is in stark contrast to the reading of non-linguistic signs that Florens relies on during her journey and highlights the importance of the slave sublime in opposition to the oppressive hegemonic language of slave owners. Rebbeca Vaark's letter represents the debilitating and dehumanizing potential of language when used by the masters against the enslaved. Despite the fact that the letter is supposed to grant Florens' passage through the world, the letter "highlights the fluid identity on the part of the migratory Black subject in a world privileging written discourse or the language of the oppressor" (Montgomery 634). During her journey to the blacksmith, Florens stops to seek shelter and is taken in by Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane. Members of the village to which these women belong arrive the next morning to determine whether or not Jane is a demon because her "eye is askew," but upon seeing the black figure of Florens, their witch hunt takes a drastic turn (Morrison 130). Her blackness causes the villagers to assert that she is a minion of the devil. At this moment Florens thinks to herself that she is "not understanding anything except that I am in danger as the dog's head shows and Mistress is my only defense. I shout, wait. I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can

talk. Let me show you my letter I say quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress" (Morrison 131). The fact that Florens cannot understand the dialogue of the villagers and recognizes the peril of her situation only through the image of a "dog's head" in Widow Ealing's kettle shows the necessity of the slave sublime for Florens as she attempts to traverse this hostile world. Florens also recognizes, however, that only the hegemonic discourse of her oppressors can grant her safe passage through this current inquisition. Florens presents her captors with Rebekka's letter, which reads:

> *The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for the female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be knowne by a burne mark in the palm of her hand. Allow her the courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return.*
>
> *Signed Rebekka Vaark, Mistress, Milton 18 May 1690.* (Morrison 132)

This letter seeks to both grant and deny Florens autonomy through the contradictory impulses of allowing her freedom of movement, but only in as far as she is acting on behalf of her owner. The paradoxical nature of this letter is reflective of the larger societal implications of the hegemonic language as it relates to enslaved people: language can be used as a tool to fight for one's autonomy, but this very same language is inextricably bound to traditions of the marginalization of African-Americans. This failure of the hegemonic language to grant the enslaved freedom is shown in this section of the text as Rebekka's letter does not convince the community to aid Florens. Instead,

they strip her of her letter and Florens, with the help of daughter Jane, escapes from the community and continues her search for the blacksmith. Florens understands the danger of continuing her quest without the authority of her mistress's letter: "With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy" (Morrison 135). As Naomi Morgenstern argues in her essay "Maternal Love/Maternal Violence: Inventing Ethics in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," "without the authorizing and protective speech of her owner, Florens is absolutely vulnerable (the 'turtle without shell' and the 'calf abandon[ed] by the herd'), deprived of any 'encircling outside thing' (58), Lina's phrase for the minimal community necessary for survival" (19). It is also important to note the image of Florens as having no "telltale signs but a darkness," which she describes as "small, feathered and toothy" (Morrison 135). Florens defines her own identity non-linguistically as an external sign of darkness and internally as an image of wildness which resurfaces in her violent final encounter with the blacksmith. The fact that Florens views her own identity as an absence, combined with the absence of the letter from her mistress, drastically negates Florens' autonomy and reveals the way in which the hegemonic language can both grant and deny the enslaved subject access to subjectivity.

Like the letter written by Rebekka, the narrative that Florens writes on the walls of Jacob's dilapidated home both aids and hinders her attempt to gain an identity. Florens

transforms her anger of being rejected by both her mother and the blacksmith into an attempt to reconstruct her self through narrative. In a moment that signifies her attainment of autonomy, Florens declares: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last." (Morrison 189). Florens is able to claim herself "in full," and she reconciles the idea of being both a slave and free by determining to "last" despite rejection and subjugation. The reconciliation of being both slave and free, however, comes at the expense of her ability to reconcile the heartaches she has suffered after being exiled from her African-American communities. Florens remains "unforgiven" by the blacksmith she has attacked and potentially killed after he rejects her and remains "unforgiving" toward her mother for offering her to Jacob Vaark. The significance of this lack of reconciliation and lack of community is reflected by the fact that Florens' experience of writing is not cathartic and she feels no relief from her traumas. Florens writes: "In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words" (Morrison 185). Though using the hegemonic language to write her story gives Florens a sense of power, the act of writing without a community to understand and offer healing shows the way in which writing "is also always at risk of being merely delusional or symptomatic. Reading and writing are potentially reparative gestures that can also be hopeless" and reinforce the enslaved subject's isolation (Morgenstern 14).

Reading the Signs of the Slave Sublime

In addition to reading and writing the hegemonic language, Florens supplements this knowledge with an emphasis on reading non-linguistic signs in order to gain autonomy and forge an identity. Ultimately, Florens argues that her inability to decipher the signs of the slave sublime results in her failure to belong to a community. Conversely, the fact that she does not have a community to teach her the meaning of the codes of the slave sublime forces her to make meaning on her own, granting her autonomy without community.

Florens cites her incapacity to decipher the signs of the imagistic language of the slave sublime as her downfall in the novel's opening:

> You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn-husk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain. . . . If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mae standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die. (Morrison 4-5)

Much like Florens, the reader feels as if "there are too many signs," making the task of interpretation difficult. This is especially the case as the reader, like Florens, has little to

no context for these omens in order to sort them out and determine their significance. Upon completion of the novel, however, the reader recognizes all of these omens as markers of an impending tragedy: the dog's profile at Widow Ealing's represents the moment Florens is stripped of her letter and dignity under the peering eyes of the villagers; the corn-husk doll is a symbol for the boy Malaik whom Florens harms which causes the blacksmith to banish her; and the garden snake mirrors the snakes on the gate of Vaark's new home and symbolizes Florens' barred access to a community. The only sign that Florens can read instantly is the refusal to brood of the pea hen which she relates to the appearance of her mother in her dreams. The fact that Florens can read this omen shows the connection to the mother tongue that is necessary for the transmission of messages through the slave sublime. Florens knows the importance of reading signs, but has also learned that there are aspects of the slave sublime that can never be read. Through her narrative, Florens is reading herself and realizes that she must become a better reader of the slave sublime if she is to claim herself "in full."

Florens' failure to read signs of nature during her journey to the blacksmith also reveals her inability to understand the slave sublime without a communal context to teach her. An example of this can be seen when Florens loses the road and tries to reorient herself using non-linguistic cues: "Hard as I try I lose the road. The tree leaves are too new for shelter, so everywhere the ground is slop with snow and my footprints slide and pool. The sky is the color of currants. Can I go more, I wonder. Should I. Two hares

freeze before bounding away. I don't know how to read that" (Morrison 48). Unlike later slaves, the young and exiled Florens, like "tree leaves too new for shelter," is unable to use the signs of nature in order to navigate the world and find the shelter of community. Florens is also unable to make sense of the "two hares [that] freeze before bounding away." Though one could endlessly speculate on the potential interpretations of this image, the significant portions of this image lie in the fact that there are two hares and that Florens herself does not speculate as to what the potential meaning of this omen could be. The pairing of the hares and Florens' inability to decipher their meaning again highlights the necessity of community while attempting to navigate the world through the slave sublime. Without someone to pass on the codes, the multiplicity of meanings associated with this non-linguistic method of communication are destined to bound away from the individual.

It is not until after Florens momentarily joins the African-American community created by the blacksmith and Malaik that she begins to learn how to read the slave sublime. Before Florens injures Malaik in an attempt to stop him from crying, Florens sees that Malaik's corn-husk doll "is not on the shelf. It is abandon in a corner like a precious child no one wants. Or no. Maybe the doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid. Which? Which is the true reading?" (Morrison 164). Her awareness that there is no "true reading" shows her growth and awareness of the slave sublime which is necessarily coded. Florens' ability to read multiple meanings of the splayed doll is

contrasted with the blacksmith who "can read the world but not letters of talk" (Morrison 188). Though the blacksmith can read the signs of nature, his decision to knock Florens "away without certainty of what is true" shows that the slave sublime does not strictly rely on reading the natural world, but also on an awareness of the unspoken signs of trauma that exist within the enslaved individual and community (Morrison 165). The blacksmith does not read the pain that has led Florens to him and as a result, they are both stripped of their community. This rejection causes Florens to assault the blacksmith and return to her master's property. Her exclusion from the community she hoped to build with the blacksmith also causes her to reject the slave sublime as a viable tool for community building: "What I read or cipher is useless now. Heads of dogs, garden snakes, all that is pointless. But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away" (Morrison 184). The fact that Florens states that what she "cipher[s] is useless now" rather than "deciphers" highlights the fact that Florens is beginning to understand that the slave sublime is a necessarily coded, secret and disguised mode of non-linguistic communication. Instead, Florens turns to the hegemonic language in the form of her writing to build a community for herself among her own words. "Thus," as Garrett Stewart argues, "the only 'cipher[ing]' that is left to her, as we're about to find, is not a decoding of the world but, in the stricter sense, an inscribed mourning for what it has denied her" (434-5). In a vicious circle from which there is no escape, Florens' lack

of community to teach her how to decode the slave sublime prevents her from gaining access to a community. It isn't until community is completely denied to her that she understands, rejects, and yet still incorporates the slave sublime into the narrative she inscribes on the walls of Vaark's property.

Community and Absence

There is a striking absence of the "politics" Gilroy typically associates with the "lower frequency" of the slave sublime such as "the power of music" where these codes "are played, danced, and acted as well as sung and sung about" within *A Mercy* (37). The absence of these features and Florens' inability to read the signs of nature until it is too late reflects the absence of an African-American community in the novel. Despite the fact that Florens is a part of a community of disenfranchised women, the master-slave dynamic and the vastly different tragedies and former communities of the women prevent them from forming a lasting community on Vaark's property.

Lina, a Native American servant, provides a communal presence for Florens. Lina, who survived the murder of her tribe after they were infected by small pox blankets, desperately needed a community to belong to. After she was abandoned by the Presbyterians who took her in after the destruction of her tribe, Lina is taken in as a servant by Vaark. As a result of this overwhelming loss and "the shame of having survived the destruction of her families," Lina vowed "never to betray or abandon anyone

she cherished" (Morrison 57). This vow leads Lina to assume a maternal role in the life of Florens when she arrives. Lina attempts to teach Florens the tools necessary for survival, but her advice is based on her own survival strategies. Lina is able to fashion an identity for herself by "piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged European medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things" (Morrison 56). As argued by Mina Karavanta, "Lina's self-invention is both an act of remembering the life she once had in her native community as well as an act that inspires and enables living without being broken" (50). Lina's memory and her connection to her mother allow her to invent "the hidden meaning of things" in a way that is strikingly similar to the slave sublime. Unfortunately, this strategy for survival that Lina seeks to impart to Florens is not applicable to her because she is fixated on forming a new African-American community with the blacksmith rather than thinking back through her mother. This can be seen in a conversation between the two women that Florens narrates: "We never shape the world [Lina] says. The world shapes us. . . . I am not understanding Lina. You [the blacksmith] are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose" (Morrison 83). Though Lina encourages Florens to accept the community she has been forced into, Florens is compelled to become a part of a freed African-American community with the blacksmith. Florens is "unable to identify with the slaves and the other indentured laborers. . . [and] finds herself

driven out by her lover—her only chance for a community outside the confines of Jacob and Rebekka's estate" (Karavanta 735). Florens' desire to belong to an African-American community "outside the confines" of her master's property with the blacksmith parallels her desire to re-create the community she lost when she was given away from her mother. This is emphasized by the fact that Florens states that there is "no need to choose." The fact that Florens believes her mother chose her brother over her reverberates throughout the narrative and causes Florens to desperately seek out an African-American community in order to construct an autonomous identity that is informed by the codes of survival of the slave sublime.

Unread Letters and Sublime Gifts

Despite her lack of an African-American community, the slave sublime is still present within the structure of Florens' narrative through the dialogic construction of her writing. The fact that Florens writes her narrative to both the blacksmith and her mother, knowing that neither will ever read her text, acknowledges the fact that some aspects of her traumatic experiences are unspeakable but not unsayable. The rupture of being severed from her mother and an African-American community is highlighted by the unread letters of the slave sublime she still attempts to send to this lost community.

Florens' narrative is constructed as a dialogue, or, as she calls it, a "telling room," addressed to both her mother and the blacksmith. This is a gulf that can never be bridged,

however, as the slave sublime acknowledges that some things necessarily remain inexpressible. The rupture between being African and African-American can never be fully healed and is represented in the text through gaps and silences in the discourse among the three central figures of Florens' drama. Despite the fact that she has been "wrenched from her mother and deprived of making a community out of love, Florens counterwrites her representation as a nothing on the wall of Jacob's mansion by writing the history" of the dissolution of her African-American community in a language that is inflected with the cadences of the slave sublime (Karavanta 735-6). Despite the fact that Florens writes in an alien language, the very act of telling her story to an unreachable audience underscores her need to transform her suffering into a potential space for healing and reconciliation that extends beyond the realm of the linguistic and into the slave sublime. Florens expresses this need as she carves her story with a nail onto the walls of Vaark's property: "I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you" (Morrison 185). The fact that Florens carves her story with a nail reveals the way in which both the materials and the hegemonic language Florens uses to write are resistant to the horrific stories of African-Americans' experiences during slavery. Despite the pain involved in the literal act of writing and recalling her story, and despite the fact that her intended audience will never actually read her story, Florens is still compelled to generate her story in the hopes that it will be passed on outside of the written tradition through the

dialogue of her "talking room" (Morrison 188). Florens is aware of the tension between her written work and the sublime message it conveys toward the conclusion of her narrative:

> If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbows and flavor the soil of the earth. (Morrison 189)

Florens' inability to decide whether or not her telling and "cipher[ing]" are pointless reveals "an insistent signifying force, an address, a claim, that never becomes transparent communication but nevertheless has disruptive effects" (Morgenstern 14). Though Florens fears that her words "will [only] talk to themselves," the "insistent signifying force" of the slave sublime transcends the boundaries of language, time, and space, taking her message to a place "beyond the eternal" and into the collective memory of not only the African-American community, but also "the soil of the earth," which speaks to the burgeoning nation of the United States and reverberates throughout the African diaspora.

Though Florens' dialogue with the blacksmith is doomed to fail because he is unlettered and possibly dead, Florens is still compelled to address her narrative to him. This seemingly futile desire in fact reveals the way in which the slave sublime exists outside of the hegemonic language and extends beyond the scope of the individual to the communal. Florens claims that she "cannot tell [her story] to anyone but you," you referring to the blacksmith, but the remainder of her account transitions to addressing an

ambiguous second-person (Morrison 188). This "you" of Florens' narrative remains vague until the sentence in which she directly addresses her mother: "Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (189). The slippage between the blacksmith, Florens' mother, and the reader who has "climb[ed] the stairs" to "come inside this talking room," reveals the way in which Florens' message has transcended the narrow confines of her stated audience (188).

The failed dialogue between Florens and the blacksmith, as Morgenstern argues, "performs a displacement and repetition" of the failed dialogue between Florens and her mother. "Psychic need or, we might say, trauma generates the narrative. Hence it is important to understand that this replayed traumatic separation is also, crucially for Morrison, the primal scene of slavery: the separation of mother and child" (15). The replaying of this "primal scene of slavery" is shown through the unread letters that Florens and her mother send to each other "in a highly symbolic gesture that seeks to bridge the psychic, geographic, and linguistic gulf between Africa and the New World" (Montgomery 630). "The fact that neither Florens nor her guilt-stricken mother hears the other woman's cathartic account" highlights the necessity of "decoding [the] signs, symbols, and gestures" of the slave sublime (Montgomery 630).

The novel is driven by Florens' inability to decipher the meaning of the unread letters her mother sends to her in her dreams. The specter of Florens' mother pervades the novel, yet she remains a silent presence until the novel's conclusion. In her recurrent

dreams of her mother, Florens refuses to read what her mother is trying to tell her: "[a dream of cherry trees walking toward her] is a better dream than a minha mae standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her" (Morrison 119). Florens looks away from her mother and rebukes her attempt at communication because her mother appears "with her little boy," signifying for Florens her moment of expulsion from her mother and by extension the African-American community. When Florens arrives at the blacksmith's home and waits for him to return from his journey to cure Rebekka, she again dreams of her mother: "as always she is trying to tell me something. I tell her to go and when she fades I hear a small creaking" (Morrison 161). Florens again banishes her mother without attempting to read her message, but her mother reappears when Florens wakes from her dream to see her "moving her lips at me but she is holding Malaik's hand in her own. I hide my head in your blanket" (Morrison 163). The fact that Florens replaces her brother with Malaik in this vision of her mother foreshadows the fact that Florens will be rejected by the blacksmith in favor of this boy in the same way she believes her mother had chosen her brother over her. As Morgenstern states, the effect of the unread message from her mother is "not only that Florens tries to read a message from which she is cut off (both on the level of the realist plot and on the level of the narrative structure) but also that this message constitutes her as a subject" (16). This results from the fact that "Florens, after all, does not only get the wrong or incomplete

message, and this is what keeps her reading; her very being is sustained by the feeling that her mother wants to tell her something" (Morgenstern 17). The knowledge that she is a recipient of an unread letter from her mother serves as the catalyst for her need to respond to her mother's unread letter with an unread letter of her own in the form of her "talking room." It is not until Florens has been rejected and denied access to another potential African-American community that she laments the fact that her mother's message will remain unread: "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her" (Morrison 189). Despite the fact that the letters of both women will never be read, as Alice Walker in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" states, "like a sealed letter they could not plainly read," Florens and her mother are still able pass "on the creative spark" of their messages which is sustained through the slave sublime (237).

Though Florens will never receive her mother's letter, in the heart-wrenching final chapter of the text, the reader is able to hear her mother's justification for giving Florens to Vaark. Far from a rejection, Florens' unnamed mother tells her daughter in her unread letter, "I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes" (Morrison 195). Florens' mother gives away her daughter in order to save her and to give her the chance to remain a human rather than become an object. Florens' mother further explains her decision in her desperate final plea:

> I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae. (Morrison 195-6)

To be both a slave and a mother "is a hard thing," but to continue to have dominion over your child when there is a more merciful option available "is a wrong thing." The most important lesson, however, is to own yourself, a lesson Florens does not learn until after she has attempted to give dominion of herself to the blacksmith. It is easy to read this final cry as a tragic example of miscommunication as Susan Strehle does in her essay "'I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism":

> Too late to console Florens, the explanation for the separation between mother and daughter cannot be imagined closing the gap in any degree—or even arriving across the chasm of time and text. Far from casting a retrospective shadow of maternal care over the narrative, this final chapter demonstrates instead the ironic failure of communication between mother and daughter, one that has already isolated the daughter. Distanced in the novel by their placement at opposite ends, separated by the narratives of those whom Florens meets on the Vaark plantation, the perspectives of mother and daughter on the moment of their separation could not be farther divided. (Strehle 120)

The perspectives of mother and daughter, however, are not nearly as divided as Strehle posits. In fact, Florens' mother responds to Florens' statement, "Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress," on the very next page when she states "But it never does any lasting good, my love. There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes" (Morrison 189-90). Rather than being

isolated monologues "at opposite ends" of the text, Florens and her mother engage in a dialogue and have never been closer as each woman expresses her yearning to bridge the impossible gap forced upon them by slavery. Additionally, this final chapter does not merely demonstrate "the ironic failure of communication" between Florens and her mother; instead, this chapter illuminates the failure of the hegemonic language of the masters to rectify the rift between mother and daughter, and, by extension, the linguistic gulf between Africa and America. Though Florens and her mother can never read the letters they send to each other, the acknowledgment that these letters, though destined to remain unread, are sent, encourages both women to continue to articulate their traumas using the slave sublime in the hopes that the attempt to communicate itself will be enough to create a space for healing and redemption from the hard choices they were forced to make as a result of the traumas of slavery.

A Mercy is a text that is saturated with the importance of reading and communication. Florens demonstrates both the value and the limitations of reading and writing the hegemonic language through the slave narrative she inscribes on the walls of her master's home. Though this act allows her to claim ownership of herself "in full," ultimately, her survival and autonomy are dependent on her ability to interpret the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime. Florens, however, recognizes that she has misread many of the signs she has encountered during her journey to build a community with the blacksmith, which is symptomatic of the loss of her mother and the lack of an African-

American communal presence to help her decipher the cipher of the slave sublime. The most formative misreading and missed reading for Florens is her incapacity to hear or understand why her mother gave her away. Though Florens "will never adequately read" her mother's message, the reader who hears this message understands that her mother's sacrifice "is the mercy of the title, even as the mother attributes the gift of mercy to Vaark, and it recalls Derrida's analysis of the gift. A gift, Derrida writes, is not a gift if either the giver or the receiver recognizes it as such. The mother in *A Mercy* gives a gift that cannot be recognized as such, and that is what constitutes it as a gift" (Morgenstern 21-2). This gift is not simply the gift of giving her away and recognizing that Florens will be strong enough to make it on her own, as Morgernstern suggests. This gift also represents the gift of the unread letters of the African-American community that exist outside of the realm of the hegemonic language, and though they can never be read, the residual traces of these letters and their unspeakable claims to truth continue to reverberate throughout Morrison's works. The following chapter will explore the ways in which these unread letters and sublime gifts continue to make up an essential element in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved.*

Chapter 2. "The Sound that Broke the Back of Words": *Beloved* and the Slave Sublime

This chapter continues to trace the slave sublime from the inaugural moment of racial slavery in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* into the era of institutionalized chattel slavery and Reconstruction in Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved.* The novel recounts the tale of Sethe and Paul D, escaped slaves from Sweet Home who suffer inexplicable trauma at the hands of their new master Schoolteacher, as they try to overcome the horrific past that haunts them and reintegrate into an African-American community. Only twenty-eight days after Sethe's escape and arrival at the home of her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, Schoolteacher comes to reclaim Sethe and her children and take them back into slavery. In an act of desperation, or "too thick-love," Sethe murders her daughter and attempts to kill the rest of her children before being stopped by Stamp Paid. She is then arrested and her surviving children live in freedom with Baby Suggs. Upon her release, Sethe and her family are haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter Beloved. This haunting then takes corporeal form as a girl the age Beloved would have been appears and terrorizes the family. Denver, Sethe's only remaining child, is able to save Sethe from her all-consuming obsession with Beloved by reaching out to the community who rejected Sethe both before and after the act of infanticide. The community of women banish Beloved allowing Sethe, Denver, and Paul D to begin the

healing process and learn what it means to claim ownership over their selves. An essential aspect of *Beloved* is the importance of overcoming traumatic experiences that defy representation by telling one's story to others. Sethe and Paul D must refashion their stories of inexplicable trauma and reclaim their selves through the code of the slave sublime in order to heal themselves and the newly freed African-American community.

As previously described, the term "slave sublime" comes to us from Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy argues that the slave sublime "can be defined precisely through its 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). Morrison's *Beloved*, then, can be seen to tackle these "forms of terror that surpass understanding" through her focus on the violence inherent in the era of slavery as well as the Middle Passage. Due to the fact that these horrors "surpass understanding," alternative modes of storytelling must be adapted in order for these stories to be told without subjecting them to the conventions of the hegemonic language of the masters that is complicit in the creation of these forms of terror, thus the necessity for the slave sublime. In this way we can see that the central concern of *Beloved*, and that of the slave sublime itself, is "the need to transform acts of unspeakable horror into a life-giving story, for the individual, for the black community, and for the nation" (Hamilton 429). Only by emphasizing the horrors of chattel slavery through non-linguistic modes of

communication within an African-American communal context can Morrison, as well as her characters, restore the stories lost to this horrific epoch of American history.

Before delving into the ways in which *Beloved* uses the slave sublime within an African-American communal context, it is important to consider why there is a deep-seated distrust of language within the African-American community and how this distrust relates to the necessity of the slave sublime as a means of redeeming this history of repression. For this examination I critique the genre of the slave narrative as it is necessarily complicit in supporting and valorizing the hegemonic language of the oppressors. The fact that Africans and African-Americans were barred access to language in its written form shows that those in power were aware of the liberating possibilities of language. Unfortunately, the few African-Americans who were able to not only learn to read and write, but excel at the art to the extent that they were able to be published, were still subjected to appeasing the ruling class through their narratives. This concession of power to a white audience is evinced most clearly in the form of the inclusion of notes from white abolitionists who vouch for the authenticity of the slave narrative. The need for validation by a white person in order for the story to be published reveals not only the distrust of the white audience as it relates to an African-American's ability to write, but it also shows the way in which language cannot offer an "authentic" depiction of the slave's reality when the narrative must be approved by one's oppressors (Hamilton 430-3). African-Americans' dependence on the authorization of the ruling class is also mirrored

by Florens in *A Mercy* in the scene in which her identity can only be validated to Widow Ealing's community by a letter written by her owner. Though slave narratives, like the narrative Florens inscribes onto the walls of her master's home, adopt the hegemonic language in order to make a case to end slavery, the authors of these texts found that their voices and creative potential were stifled within a language that intentionally excluded their participation.

Just as Florens incorporates the slave sublime into her narrative, *Beloved* and its use of the slave sublime functions as a corrective to the limitations of the slave narrative while simultaneously making apparent the ways in which language was used as a primary weapon of slavery thus creating a mistrust of the hegemonic language used by slave owners and mirrored in slave narratives. In an interview, Morrison argues that "because of the silences in the slave narratives due to authorial compromises to white audiences and to self-masking from a painful past, [she] sees her role as a writer as bearing witness to the 'interior life of people who didn't write [their history] (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it)' and to 'fill[ing] in the blanks that the slave narrative left'" (Bell 8). Morrison attempts to fill these blanks with a format that will offer insight into the psychological traumas of slavery as opposed to merely the external damages that could be used as evidence in the case against slavery. Through the incorporation of the slave sublime, Morrison and her characters are able "to overcome the limitations of the traditional slave narrative, and to expose its highly partisan agenda" (Hamilton 445).

This use of the slave sublime in opposition to the hegemonic language of the masters in *Beloved* "reveal[s] the limitations and assumptions of the American vocabulary and by 'breaking the back of words,'" does "a necessary great violence to conventional language, opening it up to the syntax and stories of African-American culture and history" (Dobbs 568).

"I Made the Ink": A Slave to the Hegemonic Language

The distrust of language within the African-American community in historical reality that is evinced through the slave narratives and is illuminated through Morrison's use of the slave sublime is mirrored by the characters within *Beloved.* The awareness of language's collusion with their oppressors is shown by Morrison, as well as her characters, through an emphasis on reading the signs of the slave sublime rather than reading written words that serve as markers of the sub-human status attributed to African-Americans.

Sixo's encounter with Schoolteacher is a powerful example of the ways in which language in the hands of the slave does not grant the enslaved subject autonomy or a voice. Much like the authors of so many slave narratives, the ability to wield language as a weapon against one's oppressors is inevitably circumscribed by the unequal power relations language adheres to. When Sixo is accused of stealing wheat in order to feed himself by his master Schoolteacher, Sixo uses wordplay to exonerate himself: "Sixo

plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work" (Morrison 224). Sixo's act can be read as what Lorraine Liscio describes as "hermeneutical anarchy," as Sixo attempts to undermine the language of his master by exposing the fact that language can be manipulated by the subjugated community and used as tool not for oppression, but for liberation (42). Sixo's playful use of language, however, does not lead to praise, nor even recognition of his authorship, only punishment: "Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belong to the definers – not the defined" (Morrison 225). This powerful statement, "definitions belong to the definers – not the defined," reveals the way in which the hegemonic language is constructed in slave society to enforce and reinforce the subjugation of the African-American speaking and writing subject. After Sixo's failure to vindicate himself through narrative construction he "finally stops speaking English and is eventually killed. He refuses to compromise or collude with the language of dominance that denies him an identity as a speaking subject" (Liscio 42). Sixo "cannot command [language] because it is governed by Schoolteacher and its use still renders him voiceless" (Fuston-White 465). Blacks are barred access to language, and even when they fight against oppression and harness the power of language, they are only reminded of the fact that language, though it may give them a sense of power, does not give them freedom or control over their lives, as they remain objectified.

In opposition to Sixo's failed attempt to harness the power of language as a way to gain his freedom, during his murder he shows his protest through the use of the slave sublime. The first example of this is when he and Paul D are surrounded by slave-catchers and Sixo "begins to sing. . . All the whitemen have to do is wait. For his song, perhaps, to end? Five guns are trained on him while they listen" (Morrison 266). The power of Sixo's song momentarily arrests his persecutors as they are unable to rationalize a discourse that exists outside of the realm of the hegemonic language that they control. It is in fact as a result of Sixo's song that Schoolteacher concludes that Sixo "will never be suitable" and decides to kill him (Morrison 266). Once Sixo is finally subdued and is tied to a tree to be burned alive, we again see Sixo protest his condition through the slave sublime: "By the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs. A rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rain water" (Morrison 266). Again it is through non-linguistic modes of protest that Sixo has his most stirring effect on his oppressors. Ultimately, "they shoot him to shut him up. Have to," in order to regain control over Sixo who has succeeded in breaking free from the control of the hegemonic language that defines him as always the defined (Morrison 267). Paul D's reflection on Sixo's subversive use of the slave sublime at the moment of his death emphasizes the importance of non-linguistic modes of communication within an African-American communal context: "He thinks he should have sung along. Loud, something loud and rolling to go with Sixo's tune, but the words put him off – he didn't

understand the words. Although it shouldn't have mattered because he understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba" (Morrison 268). Paul D's desire to sing along with Sixo highlights the importance of the communal within Morrison's usage of the slave sublime. This passage also reveals the way in which the slave sublime is in many ways more expressive than words. Despite the fact that Paul D "didn't understand the words," what is most important is the fact that the sound carries the meaning which he understands. Paul D's understanding of the meaning of this sound is also situated within the African-American communal context of the slave sublime as the "hatred" Paul D comprehends is compared to a "juba," which is "a dance originating among plantation slaves in the southern US, featuring rhythmic handclapping and slapping of the thighs" (OED). In this way Morrison shows the importance of using the slave sublime within the African-American community in order to convey the horrors of slavery that surpass understanding and are beyond the capacity of the hegemonic language to convey.

Another example of the debilitating effects of the hegemonic discourse on the enslaved subject can be seen in Schoolteacher's notes on the animalistic qualities of his slaves. The inclusion of this discourse highlights the sinister potential of language that is epitomized by Schoolteacher's statement that "definitions belong to the definers – not the defined" (225). This fear of reinforcing the dominant and oppressive force of language that has aided in marginalizing African-Americans is mirrored in Sethe's proclamation at the novel's end: "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the

ink" (Morrison 320). By forcing Sethe to make the ink, Schoolteacher "at once covers over the fact that the materials which make his writing possible are not produced by him and simultaneously reassures himself of his master(y) over the woman who does produce them" (Goldman 325). In this way the hegemonic language is doubly implicated in the subjugation of the enslaved subject as both the act of writing and the production of the tools necessary to write demean and exploit the African-American subject. The association between the hegemonic language and horrors of slavery is further emphasized by the scene in which Sethe is raped of her breast-milk. Sethe recalls and tries to repress this memory when Paul D explains to her that her husband Halle was broken after watching Schoolteacher's nephews rape her. Sethe thinks to herself: "I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (Morrison 83). "With terrible irony," Anne Goldman writes in her essay "'I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*," "it is this nightmare theft of milk, reinscribed in the schoolteacher's text with her own ink so that it circulates endlessly, that Sethe is "full" of" (324). As a result of this heinous act, Sethe links the theft of her milk with the ink she herself has made, and by extension associates written hegemonic discourses with extreme violations and degradation. Sethe's fear that she is partly responsible for the trauma she and others experienced at the hands of Schoolteacher because she made the ink with which he inscribed their less than human status is paralleled by the fear of many

characters in the novel who refuse to iterate their experiences with these same repressive discourses.

The Journey to Freedom Through the Slave Sublime

In order to combat the reinforcement of the power of the hegemonic language of the master, *Beloved* makes use of the slave sublime. The multiplicity of codes, such as reading the signs of nature, colors, and scars, shows the ways in which the African-American community has adapted meaningful modes of communication that exist outside the dominant discourses that have been used as tools of oppression against them. "Such communication" argues Lorraine Liscio, "offers an alternate mode meant like other rhetorical figurations used by black writers to break white hegemony's control and create their own identity through naming themselves" (39). *Beloved* employs scars, colors, song, dance, and music in order to explore mediums of communication that exist outside of the realm of language and are equally as successful at bearing both meaning as well as the weight of a history that defies explication. *Beloved* connects the slave sublime to African-American cultural memory in order to "pass on" a story that is impossible to "pass on." This connection serves as a way to reconstitute a lost body of history into the context of the slave sublime and out of the control of the hegemonic discourses of slavery and its narratives.

Because "written language has been used as a measure or '*sign*' of humanity,

hence dismissing Africans from the privileged group of definers of culture," attempts to communicate escapes within the African-American slave community were made outside the realm of language (Liscio 32). Much like Florens in *A Mercy* who attempts to read the signs of nature in order to find her way to the potential freedom of the blacksmith's home, both Paul D and Sethe in *Beloved* read non-linguistic signs in order to navigate their way to freedom. Unlike Florens, however, both Paul D and Sethe have the benefit of a community to teach them how to read the signs of nature and thereby attain the freedom they seek. This can be seen in Paul D's escape from Alfred, Georgia: "From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him" (Morrison 133). The success of Paul D's escape is based within the realm of the slave sublime, as his ability to gain freedom can only be measured by his ability to read the colors and signs of nature. Sethe's escape is also based within the mode of the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime. The first instance is the signal to be given by the Thirty-Mile woman who "would rattle, and that would be the sign" for the Sweet Home slaves to escape (Morrison 226). When Sethe does finally make it to Ohio, she again must rely on non-linguistic signs. Ella comes to Sethe's rescue because "Stamp leaves the old sty open when there's a crossing. Knots a white rag on the post if it's a child too" (Morrison 107-8). Lorraine Liscio in her essay "Writing Mother's Milk" argues that "for

all blacks in this novel then, meaning, indeed survival, resides in nondiscursive signs, images, the unnamed. . . knowing they cannot trust words, they learn to read" the non-linguistic (41). As a result of language's oppressive power over the African-American community, modes of communication and reading that exist outside of language's domain are a necessary part of the slave's journey from freedom to captivity, and from objectivity to subjectivity.

The significance of the slave sublime in *Beloved* as it relates to the African-American community is also evinced through a focus on colors. Baby Suggs' appetite for color comes only after she feels that The Word has been taken from her as a result of Sethe's infanticidal act and the community's failure to warn them about the arrival of the slave-catchers. Baby Suggs no longer trusts The Word and instead seeks to "fix on something harmless in this world," which for her are colors such as yellow and blue (Morrison 211). Morrison, here, may be directly engaging with Burke's definition of the relationship between color and the sublime as he writes: "when the highest degree of the sublime is intended, the materials and ornaments ought neither be white, nor green, nor yellow, nor blue" (148). In this way Baby Suggs' fixation on yellow and blue can be seen as a critique of Burke's discriminatory aesthetics in which only specific colors can be deemed "the highest degree of the sublime." Rather, Baby Suggs suggests a subjective interpretation of the sublime which privileges individual experience over the definitions of the definer. This passage also reveals a repudiation of language for the sake of the

slave sublime, highlighting the way in which language still functions as a mode of oppression. The importance of color for Baby Suggs, however, is not strictly "harmless." Sethe's perusal of Baby Suggs' room after her death foregrounds this emphasis: "Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout" (Morrison 46). The irony inherent in Baby Suggs' desire to immerse herself in colors is in fact "the absence" of color that not only haunts her home, but is also the very definition of blackness. Again we see a critique of Burke's definition of sublimity as it relates to color and blackness. Black, Burke writes, "in its own nature, cannot be considered as a color. Black bodies, reflecting none, or but a few rays, with regard to sight, are but so many vacant spaces dispersed among the objects we view" (281). How can one speak in a language in which black is defined as absence while simultaneously serving as a marker of differentiation and inferiority? As Liscio explains, Morrison "exploits both the ethnocentric definition of black as absence and the pre-oedipal mother-infant bond to summon unnamed presences in an unknown order of signification" (31). Color itself becomes dangerous based on the meanings given it to it by those who control language. Stamp Paid gives an explanation as to why Baby Suggs decides to forsake The Word in favor of the slave sublime that counters this narrative of color's collusion with white hegemony: "Her marrow was tired and it was a testimony to the heart that fed it that it took eight years to meet finally the color she was hankering

after" (Morrison 209). Despite the misery and heartbreak that follows the destruction of her family and the rejection by her community, "it is an affective knowledge, more expressive than language and deeper than desire, that sustains Baby Suggs, despite despair, through her appetite for color" (Moglen 35). By focusing on colors other than black or red, Baby Suggs is able to live out her final days in peace engaged with the slave sublime.

Sethe's relationship to color also reflects both the positive and negative aspects of the slave sublime as it relates to conveying harsh realities and providing a space for healing. After Sethe murders her crawling-already? baby, she is no longer able to see color: "Every day she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it" (Morrison 47). The affective knowledge and intensity of emotions associated with the slave sublime are overwhelming for Sethe, as she has yet to forgive herself and come to terms with her voicing of "too thick love." This absence of color during Sethe's isolation from her own narrative as well as her community highlights the way in which the slave sublime within Morrison's work functions best within a communal context. It is not until the return of Beloved that Sethe is able to see colors again:

> Now I can look at things again because she's here to see them too. After the shed I stopped. . . Now I know why Baby Suggs pondered color her last years. She never had time to see, let alone enjoy it before. . . I don't believe she wanted to get to red and I understand why because me and Beloved outdid ourselves with it.. . Now

I'll be on the lookout. Think what spring will be for us! (237)

Because Sethe equates Beloved's return with forgiveness, she is able to accept her past – a crucial step toward envisioning a future. Sethe understands the ways in which she has denied herself a present and future by dwelling on the past through an embrace of the slave sublime. Though her relationship with Beloved is toxic, without this encounter Sethe would not have stopped to notice the potential for beauty within the slave sublime and would have continued to focus solely on the "red baby's blood" and "pink gravestone chips." In this way the slave sublime functions as a mode of redemption from a horrendous past and the opening up of possibilities for future happiness that exists outside the realm of hegemonic language.

In opposition to the hegemonic language, Morrison also emphasizes the power of the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime to combat the abuses of language through the abundance of scars within the narrative. The horrific scar left on Sethe's back serves as an example of reading and writing that exists within the realm of the slave sublime. Amy Denver, Sethe's savior during her escape, describes Sethe's scar as "a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree... What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this" (Morrison 93). Sethe's back is described using the pictoral and colorful codes of the slave sublime. The text of Sethe's back highlights the dangers inherent in attempting to describe the horrors of slavery; Amy Denver aestheticizes the traumatic experience Sethe has undergone, but also uses Sethe's scarring

as a catalyst for reflecting on her own past abuses. While Sethe's back serves as a site of collective memory through its imagistic description, the message that this non-linguistic mode of communication carries is an affirmation of the power of her oppressors. Sethe's back "has been appropriated and reified as a tablet on which the slave masters have inscribed their code" (Wyatt 478). Jeanna Fuston-White in her essay "From the Seen to the Told" makes this connection between Sethe's scar and white hegemony's control over language explicit: "Sethe's back carries this new code under which she is to live, the code of domination in which the definer may inscribe his definition upon the very flesh of the defined" (466). Sethe's scar, however, is not merely an example of white hegemony inscribing its message of dominance onto the flesh of the enslaved. Sethe's scar also provides a site of collective healing and a way for her to convey some of her traumatic experiences non-linguistically. This can be seen when Paul D first arrives at her home and comforts her: "he rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (Morrison 20). In this way Sethe's scar is transformed through the slave sublime from a marker of hegemonic power to a testament to the strength of the bearer of this sign.

The importance of reading scars, which is indicative of the larger theme of reading and communicating outside of the realm of the hegemonic language of the masters, is further emphasized by the scar on Sethe's mother. One of the only memories Sethe has retained of her mother is the heart-wrenching scene in which her mother shows

her the scar "right on her rib [that] was a circle and a cross burnt right into the skin" (Morrison 72). Sethe's mother tells her the importance of this mark: "'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark'" (72). The mark left on Sethe's mother is a testament to the perverse code left behind by the cruelty of the slaveholders. What is more important about this mark, however, is that it not only symbolizes the brutality of the masters, but it also serves as a marker of differentiation; the only connection Sethe has to her mother is through this important lesson in learning to read non-linguistic modes of communication. This reading of the scarring of the body, as articulated by Cynthia Dobbs, is significant "to the extent to which these hieroglyphic scars remain written on black bodies and black consciousness even to the present day, our racial and national survival may depend ultimately on our learning to read that scarring" (575). In this way *Beloved* highlights the importance of interpreting signs that exist outside of language for not only the characters in the novel, but also for readers and implicates them in the process of redeeming this history of repression.

Redemption Songs

Song and dance also play an integral role in the redemptive possibilities of the slave sublime within the African-American community in opposition to the oppressive

powers of language. Vikki Visvis articulates this in her essay on Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, but this sentiment is applicable to the context of *Beloved*: "Repeatedly disenfranchised by language, protagonists opt for an alternative medium of expression in the form of music that not only emotionally appeases but also politically empowers" (263). The emotional and liberating capability of song can be seen in Paul D's survival and escape from Alfred, Georgia. When asked by Sethe what happened to him after he was sold from Sweet Home, Paul D tells her that he "never talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul" (Morrison 85). Paul D's refusal to tell his story in words mirrors the novel's larger concern with rendering the narratives of the traumatic events of slavery within the same discourse as those competing narratives that deny African-Americans humanity. Not only does Paul D opt to sing his story rather than tell, but his escape and survival tactics while he is in Alfred also stay within the realm of the slave sublime. This can be seen in the description of Paul D's experience on the chain gang: "With a sledge hammer in his hands and Hi Man's lead, the men got through. They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings" (Morrison 128). The description of Paul D and the other men on the chain gang's method of communication is precisely what Gilroy describes as the slave sublime: "Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means" (37). It is only through the slave sublime

within a communal context that Paul D and the others are able to bear the dehumanizing conditions of Alfred. Their "garbled words" that "yielded up other meanings" allow them to communicate their hatred for their oppressors to each other without allowing these intentions to be read by their oppressors. Additionally, the collective slave sublime within the chain gang serves as not only a means of critiquing both the actions and ideologies of their oppressors, but also as a means of garnering their freedom. During a heavy storm the ditch in which the members of the chain gang were forced to live begins to flood. In a perverse baptismal scene, the men then drag themselves under, through, and out of the mud through non-linguistic communication: "The chain that held them would save all or none, and Hi Man was the Delivery. They talked through that chain like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up" (Morrison 130). Again we see that healing is achieved through the collective slave sublime which is an integral part of Morrison's project of reconstituting cultural memory within an African-American communal context.

Much like the scar on her mother's ribs, Sethe's connection to Nan, the woman who raised her, exists solely within the context of the slave sublime through song and dance. This is shown when Beloved asks Sethe whether or not her mother ever did her hair. In struggling to answer this question, Sethe involuntarily begins to recall her repressed memories of childhood:

> She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am had spoke, and which would never come back. But the message – that was and

had been there all along. (74)

It is in a code "beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual, and discursive" that Nan leaves bodily resonances with Sethe (Gilroy 37). Sethe's only attachment to her childhood is not through words, but through song and dance, the language of the slave sublime. The importance of song is explained by Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" in which she writes: "It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*" (237). In this way we can see this connection to the extra-linguistic within the context of African-American music as indicative of the slave sublime's attempts to "repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable," and to convey the traumatic history of the era of slavery without reinforcing the discourse of white hegemony (Gilroy 38).

The "fixing ceremony" in the Clearing where Baby Suggs had danced in the sunlight perhaps offers Morrison's most striking example of the redemptive possibilities of the slave sublime within the African-American communal context. Baby Suggs' speech foregrounds the necessity of reclaiming and loving the body through the slave sublime because language has taught them to hate their bodies. The fact that her speech starts with "laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up" implicates the community as a whole within the realm of the slave sublime before the speech act can take place (Morrison 103). The deliverance preached by Baby Suggs relates wholly to an emphasis on the body and the slave sublime: "Here. . . in this place,

we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard" (103). Despite the fact that Baby Suggs' uses language to begin to convey her message of redemption from the dehumanizing effects of slavery and it's aftermath to the African-American community, she concedes that words are ultimately incapable of delivering the redemption so desperately needed by her community: "Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music" (Morrison 104). Baby Suggs acknowledges that "words have no meaning and the sound carries every inch of sorrow and despair harbored inside the members of the enslaved community" (Visvis 262). This fixing ceremony also recognizes that "mere words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth" (Gilroy 37). Baby Suggs' speech thus epitomizes the importance of configuring redemption outside of the hegemonic discourses of the slaveholders and within the collective slave sublime of the African-American community.

The Unread Letters of the Middle Passage

Though the slave sublime offers redemption from a painful past for those within the African-American community, those who lost their lives during the Middle Passage necessarily exist outside of the realm of language. Fuston-White expresses a similar

concern in her essay: "Morrison equips her named characters with a command of language, thus lending to their identity formation, but those lost in the Middle Passage have no language that can give them presence" (465). As a result of the failure of *any* language to encompass the countless bodies lost to the Middle Passage, Morrison uses non-linguistic methods of representation to memorialize this mass loss of life. Morrison foregrounds the difficulty of describing the horror of the Middle Passage through the character of Beloved when she attempts to describe her journey to reunite with Sethe and asks, "How can I say things that are pictures?" (248). As Helene Moglen argues in her essay "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," it is through the slave sublime, "speaking what she remembers not as words but as pictures, [that] she tells of the Middle Passage – the journey from freedom to captivity – when the eternality of home and the unity of self were lost" (30). It is through the imagistic codes of the slave sublime that Beloved seeks to capture a narrative that "cannot be encompassed within the symbolic order [and] continues to haunt it, hovering on the edge of language" (Wyatt 479). This can be seen throughout the middle portion of the novel in which the consciousness of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver collapse into one and Beloved describes the experience of the Middle Passage: "I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth he sang through his singing was soft his singing is of the place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a warm basket" (Morrison 250). The use of the slave sublime is compounded by an emphasis on images rather than

words as well as a focus on song. The convoluted syntax of this passage mirrors not only the cramped conditions on the slave ship, but also the way in which normative modes of storytelling falter in the face of the extreme trauma of the Middle Passage. Within this segment of the text "meaning is produced by a continual oscillation between presence and absence: granting a thing an identity through language (presence) by cushioning it against what it is not (absence)" (Liscio 32). Morrison grants identity to those lost in the Middle Passage through the slave sublime in order to avoid reaffirming the power of hegemonic language, but "cushions" this presence with narrative gaps in order to emphasize the fact that even the slave sublime is incapable of containing this narrative. Morrison's systematic gaps accompanied by the incorporation of the slave sublime "recognizes that trauma is an elusive mental wound that defies representation and leaves its victims without a vocabulary that can sufficiently articulate traumatic experience" (Visvis 261). This recognition of the failure of narrative to express the horror of the ontological rupture of the Middle Passage is indicative of Morrison's project of recuperating the stories lost to this history of violence through the medium of the slave sublime.

"Pass On": Collective Memory and the Slave Sublime

Although there is no language capable of capturing the stories of those lost in the Middle Passage, for Sethe, redemption from her infanticidal past is achieved through

collective memory and the slave sublime. As articulated by Moglen, "the enactment of collective memory rooted" in the slave sublime "transforms a timeless present into a future of possibilities by redeeming the past" (35). This redemptive quality of the slave sublime within a communal context is shown at the novel's conclusion when the community of women comes to save Sethe from Beloved: "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" (Morrison 305). This re-creation scene, which signifies on the creation scene in Genesis, flips the biblical creation story on it's head by asserting that it is sound, not the word, that existed in the beginning. This passage emphasizes a move back to non-linguistic modes of communication that exist not only outside of, but in fact prior to the hegemonic language of the masters imposed on the enslaved population. This passage also evokes "black music in the form of call/response" as the women in the community work together to call/respond to Sethe, which "not only bears witness to trauma but also implicates the African-American community in the event, and so has collective dimensions" (Visvis 266). The collective dimensions of the slave sublime are further emphasized in Sethe's redemption: "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 key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (Morrison 308). Breaking "the back of words" is a necessary part of Sethe's redemption as it is language, in the form of the written law of

the Fugitive Slave Act as well as Schoolteacher's dehumanizing notes about her animalistic qualities, that drives Sethe to the desperate act of infanticide. Sethe is "baptized in" the "wash" of the sound of her community and thereby redeemed (Morrison 308). In this way Morrison redeems Sethe without subjecting her to further repression through the language of the masters and instead situates her redemption within the context of the collective memory of the slave sublime.

The slave sublime's preoccupation with creating solidarity in the face of the unspeakable terrors of slavery is necessitated by the recognition that conventional language is not only incapable of containing the traumatic experiences of slavery, but has also been used as a tool of oppressing the very narratives they seek to reconstruct. As a result of this collusion of language with white hegemony's control, Morrison incorporates the slave sublime into her novel *Beloved* and places it firmly within the context of the healing powers of the African-American community. Morrison's awareness of language's collusion with white, hegemonic discourses, and the acknowledgment of the failure of any language to adequately convey the traumas of slavery, necessitates the use of the slave sublime rooted in collective memory. Despite the incorporation of the slave sublime in the novel as means of rejecting the hegemonic language, the systematic gaps and silences in the text highlight the fact that there is no discourse, not even the slave sublime, that can fully convey the horrors of slavery. The novel's repeated final phrase, "this is not a story to pass on" can then be read as "a warning: no metaphor can

satisfactorily represent these people" (Liscio 36). As the enigmatic repeated phrase suggests, the tale of *Beloved*, and of American slavery, is "not a story to pass on" (Morrison 324). It is a story which cannot be told; one that cannot be ignored; and one that cannot die as it continues to haunt the present. The ways in which the horrors of slavery and its aftermath can still be confronted and expressed using the codes of the slave sublime into the 20th-century and beyond will be explored in the following chapter's examination of Toni Morrison's 1993 novel *Jazz*.

Chapter 3. Closing the Gap and Spanning the Distance: *Jazz* and the Slave Sublime

In this concluding chapter I continue to trace the slave sublime into the twentieth century in Morrison's novel *Jazz*. Set in the mid-1920's, *Jazz* highlights the relationship between black music and the slave sublime within the African-American community. This chapter focuses on the formal aspects of the novel, specifically the function of the narrator as an embodiment of jazz, but also, in an emphatically modernist meta-textual move, as the embodiment of the literal book *Jazz* itself. Creating a narrator which can be read as the bound book held in the hands of the reader implicates the reader, and by extension the community, within the realm of the slave sublime. The reader is called to respond to and interpret the code of the slave sublime as presented by the narrator and the text itself. It is important to note not only the way in which the formal aspects of the text connect African-American music to the slave sublime, but also the way in which jazz music as it is represented within the text functions as a code that exists outside of the realm of language. Music, an integral aspect of the slave sublime, is used as a means to create solidarity within the community and to express what is otherwise inexpressible.

Music is not the only reincarnation of the slave sublime within the urban setting of *Jazz.* Joe Trace brings with him to the City his skills of hunting in which he relies not on reading the many signs in the urban setting, but on reading and tracing the signs that exist outside of language, such as the marks on Dorcas' face. Reading the signs of nature

is also crucial to Joe's quest to find Wild, the mother he has never met. Again, this search for a lost mother figure is a metaphor for the larger loss of the motherland as a result of slavery as well as the enforced exile from the South during the Great Migration. Joe Trace must create a new community in the City, but the creation of this new community can only occur through an engagement with the haunting absence of his mother, who is the embodiment of the slave sublime. Wild hovers on the edge of the community and on the edge of language itself. Her blackness is a wild and absent presence that is the antithesis of the pervasive presence the City. Wild, much like Beloved, occupies a liminal space between the natural and supernatural, and stands in as the symbol of "motherlessness." Wild's presence and absence haunt both Joe Trace and the text/narrator until the novel's conclusion. Much like the redemption offered by Baby Suggs and the community in *Beloved*, "if we see in Wild the embodiment of the wild pain and suffering of slavery, we understand that release, healing is homeopathic; we must first evoke and (re-)experience the pain in order to find solace" (Lesoinne 161). Redemption can only be achieved through an engagement with the unread letters of Wild, through a confrontation with an unspeakable past and a rebirth into the African-American community through the slave sublime.

Unlike *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, *Jazz* takes place well after slavery has been abolished. Significantly, however, the main characters of the novel, Joe Trace and his wife Violet, as well as the many inhabitants of the City, are still haunted by the traumas of

slavery. As such, the slave sublime is still an essential aspect of the characters' quests for healing and integration into their new urban community. In her essay "Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and the City," Anne Paquet-Deyris underscores the way in which the city and its inhabitants are necessarily impacted by the traumas of slavery:

> As a new composite, the City is conditioned by the Great Migration from the rural South which started in the 1870s and climaxed between 1910 and 1930. Whatever traces of this former history survive in the text remain fragmentary or else unarticulated. . . . The 'disremembered and unaccounted for' stories of times past can only reemerge as loose fragments patched up by an uncertain if forceful narrator. And the context the narrator provides for these migrants' dreams also precludes any smooth representation of 'the glittering city' (Jazz 35) and its 'race music.' (219)

Jazz, as both novel and music, represents an attempt to articulate the "loose fragments" of the traumas of slavery through non-linguistic modes of communication and is "ultimately one process through which [the African-American community] may heal itself" (Brown 629). Through an ever-present yet elusive narrator relating Joe and Violet's search for healing and selfhood within the cityscape, *Jazz* highlights the necessity of utilizing the slave sublime within this new urban setting, ultimately refuting the narrator's claim that "history is over, you all, and everything is ahead at last" (Morrison 7). "It is this past, discarded but ever-present," argues Caroline Brown in her essay "Golden Gray and the Talking Book: Identity as a Site of Artful Construction in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," "that becomes the ghost, the beloved, of *Jazz*. The narrator conjures it; the text itself functions as the mechanism through which it is exorcised" (640). The tool that is used in the text to

"exorcise" the haunting presence of the traumas of slavery is the slave sublime.

"Structure Equals Meaning": The Form of the Slave Sublime

Jazz highlights aspects of the slave sublime, such as an emphasis on song, music, the failure of the hegemonic language to convey the traumas of slavery, and the need to create communal solidarity, not only within the narrative, but also on a structural level. Morrison makes this relationship between structure and meaning in *Jazz* explicit in the foreword to the novel:

> Although I had a concept, its context, a plot line, characters, data, I could not establish the structure where meaning, rather than information, would lie; where the project came as close as it could to the idea itself – the essence of the so-called Jazz Age. . . . Primary among these features, however, was invention. Improvisation, originality, change. Rather than be about those characteristics, the novel would seek to become them. . . . I had written novels in which structure was designed to enhance meaning; here the structure would *equal* meaning. The challenge was to expose and bury the artifice and to take practice beyond the rules. (xviii-xix)

In this way Morrison makes apparent that the form of *Jazz* not only enhances the meaning of the text, but in fact bears the meaning of the text. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the slave sublime is embedded within the very form of the text. The formal emphasis on the slave sublime is felt through the sound and rhythm that begins and ends the text. *Jazz* opens with the narrator's cryptic sound: "Sth" (Morrison 3). Though the meaning of this sound is open to interpretation, as some scholars claim it is the sound "of a woman's mouth as she wets her thread before directing it through the eye

of a needle," (O'Reilly 377) while others argue it is the sound of a woman sucking her teeth in preparation for a speech act, what is significant is that this sound yields a multiplicity of meanings and inaugurates the reader into discourse that is non-linguistic. "Thus," argues Andrea O'Reilly, "we enter the text not through language, but through nonverbal, pre-discursive sound similar to the chanting of the thirty conjure women in *Beloved*. . . .it is a lexicon of the primal, original "language" of the body, that which circulates outside of words" (377). This immediate introduction to the slave sublime through the use of sound rather than language is also displayed in the form of the text at the novel's conclusion. The narrator transitions her focus away from the final scene of the novel in which Joe, Violet, and Felice dance together in an apartment toward a view of life in the City generally. Rather than describing the City with adjectives, the narrator incorporates the slave sublime into her description through an emphasis on the rhythms of the city: "Both the warning and the shudder come from the snapping fingers, the clicking. And the shade. . . . Some of them know it. The lucky ones. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same size so you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap" (Morrison 227). The "it" the narrator refers to remains as vague as the time on the "magician-made clock with hands the same size," which is why only "the lucky ones" are able to understand what the rhythmic "ticking, tap, snap" signifies. The signified remains unexplained, yet members of the community are able to decipher the rhythm of the City, to distinguish the "warning and

the shudder" from "the shade," and to "sigh and sleep in relief" by deciphering the code of the slave sublime within their urban community.

The emphasis on sound and rhythm in the text is not the only way in which *Jazz* incorporates aspects of the slave sublime on a formal level. Text also highlights the failure of language, repudiating its own medium and exalting the slave sublime. On multiple occasions, the narrator laments her failure to communicate the subjectivities of her main characters. The narrator claims, "I missed it altogether," "I overreached and missed the obvious" and that her tale is "doomed to misunderstanding" (Morrison 220). What the narrator truly laments, however, is not her own shortcomings as a storyteller, but the failure of language in general to describe or heal the psychic wounds experienced by the novel's protagonists. "It is that sign system," Majorie Pryse argues, "that is unreliable, not the narrator, which may explain why the narrator worries about being doomed to misunderstanding" (602). The narrator's internalization of language's failure "reveals the power that an alien discourse continues to hold over her because it seems to promise a language that might reconnect her to the community she has left behind, a language on the other side, so to speak, of the representational discourse of a white patriarchal order" (Nowlin 154). What the narrator, and by extension *Jazz* attempts, then, is to incorporate the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime within a text that necessarily exists within the realm of hegemonic discourse on a formal level. "Thus, Morrison is interested in how claims of knowledge and authority remain insufficient in

seeing the whole picture. Indeed, she seems to suggest that language, discourse, can never know and understand it all. . . . as it 'ends' the narrative with disorder, ambiguity, and an openness that draws the reader into its realm" (Albrecht-Crane 69-71). The use of sounds, rhythms, an overt rejection of language, and a direct engagement with the reader are some of the formal tools used in *Jazz* to place the narrative within the realm of the slave sublime in order to offer healing from a repressed past to the newly urbanized African-American community.

Music as a "Rope Cast for Rescue"

As the title suggests, music plays a significant role in *Jazz* and is an essential aspect of the slave sublime as articulated by Paul Gilroy. The role of music in the text relates to the slave sublime through its ability to communicate the unsayable as well its capacity to forge solidarity within the fragmented and traumatized urban African-American community. As Lesoinne explains, music "is of absolute necessity for all communities struggling for self-repossession, for one of the major steps is the ability to recover a voice for oneself, to become the speaker again, to become the teller of one's own (hi)story. The African American communities started doing this through music, since any other kind of self-expression was forbidden under slavery" (157). It is important to note not only the link between music and slavery, but also the way in which the African-American community is able to reclaim its voice through non-linguistic modes of

communication. During a protest following the East St. Louis riots, a young Dorcas, Joe's later lover, and her Aunt Alice witness music's ability to express the inexpressible while also creating a space of healing and solidarity for the community:

> Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums. . . . Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. (53-4)

For both witnesses and participants of this protest, language, both in the form of speech and text, has been rendered obsolete and "music seems to function as a substitute voice here. It provides the historical background the narrative voice incompletely supplies. At the heart of the text – and of the City – it restores continuity, exposing the anger" (Paquet-Deyris 221). The slave sublime is thus clearly evoked as the drums work to articulate the rage and trauma experienced by the African-American community in a way that speaking in the hegemonic language cannot. The fact that the words on the banner which contain "promises from the Declaration of Independence" are never represented in the text also highlights the inadequacy and failures of the hegemonic language to offer healing to the African-American community it has so often disenfranchised. In addition to the failure of the words on the banner to express the anger of the African-American community, Alice also finds an "explanatory leaflet" meant for the "whitemen in straw

hats who needed to know what the freezing faces already knew" (Morrison 58). The inclusion of this leaflet for the white audience further emphasizes the connection between language and white patriarchal discourse as well as the fact that the African-American community has created another meaningful mode of communication that exists outside of this realm. Alice feels as if "some great gap lunged between the print" and the young Dorcas, whose parents were both killed during the riots (58). Alice is unable "to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words" until the slave sublime intervenes in the form of the drums: "then, suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those at the windows above" (58). As Tamas Dobozy explains, in juxtaposition to "the pamphlets meant to restore validity to the 'slippery crazy words' that memorialize and represent the real,"the music, "by contrast, does not seek restitution by re-constituting a specific content" (208). Rather, the drums seek to communicate, as they have done within the enslaved population of the African-American community and the freed communities of Africans before them, the inexpressible anger and anguish experienced by the community, and in so doing provide a site for collective healing.

Dorcas, however, interprets an alternate meaning from these Fifth Avenue drums. "For her the drums were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence. She remembered them as a beginning, a start of something she looked to

complete" (Morrison 60). This "funeral parade for her mother and father" is Dorcas' earliest memory of life in the City. Newly orphaned and under the overbearing care of her Aunt Alice, Dorcas is compelled to repress the anger and traumas she experienced before arriving in the City and instead seeks to embrace "that life-below-the-sash" that is also promised by the music of the City (60). The connection among Dorcas' repression, music, and sexual awakening is made explicit through an extended metaphor that connects the literal fire that killed her mother with the fire that burns inside Dorcas. A chip from this fire

> must have entered her stretched dumb mouth and traveled down her throat because it smoked and glowed there still. . . . while they watched the parade, the bright wood chip sank further and further down until it lodged comfortably somewhere below her navel. She watched the black unblinking men, and the drums assured her that the glow would never leave her, that it would be waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to be touched by it. (Morrison 60-1)

The anger that Dorcas must feel after her mother is murdered is converted into a sexual desire the further it is repressed and digested. What she understands from the drums, then, is conditioned by her refusal to confront her own traumatic past in favor of escape through the sensual pleasures offered by the City. Dorcas' inability to heal herself through an engagement with her past prevents her from hearing the all-embracing call of the drums and from participating in the African-American community's quest for healing. "How one fares in the City," Paquet-Deyris argues, "depends greatly on interpreting the sporadic answers one can wrestle from it. The necessary displacement/repositioning it

imposes upon everyone entering its limits relies as much on the inflections of the communal voice as on the individual's capability to find his or her own voice" (223). Though the slave sublime is enacted through the drums' attempt to communicate terrors that surpass understanding in order to form a community that can heal from experiences which defy direct representation, the individual is still responsible for interpreting these codes in a way that will provide healing for both the individual as well as the community.

Though the drums of the parade offer a powerful example of the use of the slave sublime in the form of music in the novel, it is also important to note that jazz music[1] serves a very similar function throughout the novel. There are numerous occasions in the text where jazz music is imbued with the ability to communicate the inexpressible. One moment in particular toward the novel's conclusion, however, is especially pertinent to discussions of the slave sublime as a result of its imagery and connection to nature. This passage occurs after the narration of Dorcas' murder by Joe and following a systematic gap in the form of a blank page in the text. The narrator resumes control of the text and states:

> I could hear the men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn't have a bucket to hold it and didn't want one either. They just wanted to let it run that day, slow if it wished, or fast, but free run down the trees bursting to give it up. (197)

[1] It is important to note that the term "jazz" is never explicitly stated within the text.

With images of trees, the insistence on complete exuberance within the community as a whole which takes place entirely within the realm of the slave sublime, it is almost as if the reader has been transported back to the Clearing of *Beloved* where Baby Suggs held her fixing ceremony. In both scenes, "the music celebrates freedom, arriving at the 'holy' by way not of scripture but of possibility, by letting the music 'run that day' as if it were determining itself, in the same way that Morrison's characters" are seeking that same self-determination (Dobozy 214). It is in this ability to "celebrate freedom" despite the traumas experienced by the African-American community that we find the transformative nature of jazz, and by extension the slave sublime; for the slave sublime's capacity to express the inexpressible hurt and anger felt by the community is matched only by its ability to communicate the inexpressible joys of freedom and redemption to be found in the healing of the community.

Following the Trail: Reading the Signs of Nature

Music is not the only aspect of the slave sublime that is manifested within *Jazz*. Much like *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, there is an emphasis on reading the signs of the natural world rather than the signs of hegemonic language within *Jazz*. The novel foregrounds the importance of reading non-linguistic signs by revealing the instability of the hegemonic language. In addition to the narrator's own admissions regarding language's inability to communicate the inner life of fragmented African-American subjects, the City

itself is guilty of using language as a weapon against the African-American community. This can be seen in the description of the multiple signs that litter the City as the narrator states:

> the City is smart at this: smelling good and looking raunchy; sending secret messages disguised as public signs: this way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room stop dog on premises absolutely no money down fresh chicken free delivery fast. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own. (Morrison 64)

The narrator gives the City a sense of insidious agency here as it is designed to seduce and entrap the African-American subject. The slippage between the "public signs" and "secret messages" designed to disorient and fragment the community is emphasized through the disappearance of punctuation as the signs progress. Through a convoluted syntax eerily similar to the syntax used by Beloved to describe the cramped conditions of the Middle Passage, the City reveals its own disregard for individual identity as no subject can be distinguished from the next. "Morrison depicts the urban culture zone as a dizzying arena of signs, which threatens to trap black aspiration in a cycle of self-alienating and self-defeating desire" (Scheiber 482). The City also attempts to stifle the voice of the slave sublime by "covering" the moans of the African-American inhabitants "with its own." The loud voice of the City, speaking in the non-hermeneutic voice of the hegemonic language, seeks to subsume the non-linguistic voice of the slave sublime in order to prevent the African-American subject from engaging with a painful past within a communal context in favor of "the new."

Though Joe Trace falls victim to the seduction of the City by way of his affair and eventual murder of his lover Dorcas, Joe still relies heavily on the slave sublime in order to find healing from his own traumatic past, namely the abandonment by his mother Wild. During Joe's quest to find and kill Dorcas, he relies not on the dizzying signs of the City, but instead on the skills he learned from his surrogate father Hunter, which is tracing the non-linguistic marks on Dorcas' face. The "little half moon" scars on Dorcas face are themselves an aspect of the slave sublime as they represent the physical remains of a traumatic past that defies representation. As Paquet-Deyris explains, the scars on Dorcas face represent

> traces of loss [that] resurface and inscribe themselves in the characters' lives and bodies. The organic traces left by history on someone's skin and the stories enslaved and broken bodies tell form a major topos in Morrison's novels. *Beloved*'s heroine Sethe has had a tree of flesh on her back ever since she was whipped by the slavemaster. . . . In *Jazz*, the half-moons on Dorcas's cheeks and forehead indirectly testify to the torture she endured as a child, when she witnessed her father and mother stomped and burned to death during the East St. Louis riots. (225)

For Dorcas, who is unable to confront her traumatic past and learn to heal, the scars on her face are the only way in which she is able to communicate her suffering. In this way the marks left on Dorcas emphasize the importance of reading scars, which is indicative of the larger theme of reading and communicating outside of the realm of hegemonic language.

Joe Trace's willingness to engage with his past through the use of the slave

sublime enables him to track Dorcas through the non-linguistic signs of her scars. The narrator believes, however, that Joe has no agency in following the trail left by Dorcas as she states, "take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town" (Morrison 120). The connection between the "Bluebird record" and Joe's inability to stay off the track strengthens the connection between the non-linguistic signs Joe relies on and music, both of which are key elements of the slave sublime. Though the narrator is correct in asserting that Joe is "bound to the track," the implication that Joe has no agency in this quest is misguided. Joe must follow Dorcas using the slave sublime not because this is the path the City has laid for him, but because he is ready to begin to engage with his own traumatic past. The very act of following the trail harkens back to Joe's life before the City where he learned that "in this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. . . . something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look" (Morrison 130). Joe's quest for the signs Dorcas sends parallels his quest for his mother Wild. Dorcas is there to fill the "inside nothing" that Joe feels as a result of his mother's abandonment because Dorcas, too, feels this "inside nothing" as a result of the murder of her parents (Morrison 38). Importantly, this inside nothing is inextricably bound to the "hooves tracing her cheekbones," as these marks of the slave sublime are a testament to the creation of this inside nothing and also serve as way for both Joe and Dorcas to communicate their inexpressible traumas to each

other. As O'Reilly argues, "only when Joe truly acknowledges and feels the emotional wounds of his motherlessness is healing made possible. Joe finds in Dorcas the mother he never knew and wants from her the love he never had. With the death of Dorcas, Joe is, at last, able to grieve the loss of his mother and move beyond the grief toward forgiveness and acceptance" (376). In this way, Joe's healing can only come with an engagement with the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime, represented by Dorcas' scars which are ultimately indicative of his mother Wild, the embodiment of the slave sublime.

Wild as the Embodiment of the Slave Sublime

Wild, the long-lost mother of Joe Trace, functions as the embodiment of the slave sublime in *Jazz*. Her absent presence haunts Joe Trace, the community, and the narrative itself, despite the fact that she never utters a single word. Wild exists wholly and solely within the realm of the slave sublime, reminding the urban City-dwellers of the wild and inexpressible suffering of slavery and forcing them to engage with her haunting presence before healing and solidarity can occur. We first encounter Wild in corporal form in the segment where Golden Grey searches for his lost father Henry LeStroy. Golden Grey, a child who believes he is white until in his adulthood his mother reveals that his father is of African descent, is disgusted by the knowledge of his black ancestry and, as such, is repulsed by the blackness of Wild whom he finds in the woods on his way to surprise his father. Despite his repulsion, Golden Grey rescues the frightened woman, who faints at

the sight of his whiteness. Golden Grey saves Wild only because " he wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils. Except this monster without scales or flaming breath is more dangerous for she is a bloody-faced girl of moving parts, of luminous eyes and lips to break your heart" (Morrison 154-5). This fairy-tale description of Wild that posits her as monstrous because of her blackness is reflected by the community well after her encounter with Golden Grey: "the small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere" (Morrison 179). Yet again we see Wild described as subhuman, as she is called a "creature." It is also important to note that despite being thought of as "powerless" and "invisible," Wild is "everywhere and nowhere," and therefore embodies the repressed but ever-present haunting past of slavery. Wild hovers on the edge of the community, and on the edge of language itself, as she lives "just far enough away to annoy everybody because she was not completely gone, and close enough to scare everybody because she creeps about and hides and touches and laughs a low sweet babygirl laugh in the cane" (Morrison 37). In this way, among others, Wild is linked to Beloved. The connection among Wild, Beloved, and the slave sublime is made explicit by Andrea O'Reilly:

> As Beloved "walked out of the water" in the stream (50), Wild is found "in the woods. Where wild women grow" (171). As devil-child and wild-woman, neither is"of woman born." They exist outside of and beyond the Real, the Symbolic, the Human, in an almost timeless natural and supernatural place. Both seem to be

> fairies or witches with a magical "shining" and supernatural power. (373)

O'Reilly continues to emphasize this connection among Wild, Beloved, and non-linguistic modes of communication through Julia Kristeva's definition of the semiotic. O'Reilly asserts that Wild's "laughter, song, and touch form the language of semiotic discourse" which "interrupts the symbolic and 'returns' in the form of rhythm, word play, melody, and laughter" (374). Though O'Reilly connects the discourse of Beloved and Wild to the semiotic in order to emphasize the connection between non-linguistic modes of communication and mothering, the notions of "rhythm, word play, melody, and laughter" are all part of the slave sublime which extends beyond the familial and implicates the community as a whole.

Joe's search for Wild, then, can be seen as an analogy for the larger African-American community's need to engage with the repressed past of slavery before one can find healing within the new urban community. Early in the novel, Joe recognizes that the only way he will be able to communicate with this lost mother is through the slave sublime:

> Just a sign, he said, just show me your hand, he said, and I'll know don't you know I have to know? She wouldn't have to say anything, although nobody had ever heard her say anything; it wouldn't have to be words; he didn't need words or even want them because he knew how they could lie, could heat your blood and disappear. (Morrison 37)

Joe recognizes the capacity of the hegemonic language to lie and knows that the only way to engage with the "inside nothing," the wild and inexpressible suffering that is both his own personal wound as well as that of the African-American community as whole is through an alternative mode of communication that exists beyond the realm of language. The need to confront this painful past through the slave sublime is further emphasized by Joe's search for Wild in the woods:

> Knowing the music the world makes has no words, he stood rock still and scanned his surroundings. A silver line lay across the opposite bank, sun cutting into the last of the night's royal blue. Above and to his left hibiscus thick, savage and old. Its blossoms were closed waiting for day. The scrap of song came from a woman's throat, and Joe thrashed and beat his way up the incline and through the hedge, a tangle of muscadine wines, Virginia creeper and hibiscus rusty with age. (176-7)

This scene harkens back to the journeys of Florens in *A Mercy* and Paul D in *Beloved:* all three rely on reading the signs of nature in order to find their way to freedom and become part of a loving and healing community. The use of music is manifold in this passage as the slave sublime exists in "the music the world makes," which seamlessly transforms into the "scrap of song" that comes from Wild. Joe is never able to see Wild in the flesh, but it is precisely through his search for her, a search that is fueled by the codes of the slave sublime, that he is eventually able to forgive Wild, and himself, and integrate back into his family and community. Just as the letters sent by Florens and her mother in *A Mercy* remain unread, Joe's quest to find Wild sends residual traces of their trauma which are communicated through the slave sublime. By extension, Joe's engagement with his

own traumatic past serves as a metaphor "for African American communities: this means finding the place of reconciliation with one's historical past, the locus where the wild pain and suffering of slavery and racial prejudice is no longer frightening" (Lesoinne 161).

The Sublime Secret of Wild

Just as Joe Trace attempts to seek Wild through the slave sublime, the narrator of *Jazz* undergoes a similar search. Again this search requires an engagement with the traumatic past of slavery and results in the narrator receiving healing through the acknowledgment of being a recipient of the unread letters of Wild. The fact that this healing comes not from narrative construction in the hegemonic language and instead through the slave sublime heightens the necessity of using non-linguistic modes of communication in order to rectify the wounds sustained by the racial terrors of slavery that continue to haunt the present.

The narrator's search for Wild, like Joe's own search, leads to acceptance and the creation of a communal space. This can be seen when the narrator states: "I'd love to close myself in the peace left by the woman who lived there and scared everybody. Unseen because she knows better than to be seen. After all, who would see her, a playful woman who lived in a rock?" (Morrison 221). Rather than remaining isolated and burying one's inexpressible and haunting past, Wild leaves behind a space of peace which the narrator seeks to enter. This fact is further emphasized by the narrator as she claims

"she has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me. Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret. Now I know" (Morrison 221). "This passage also unveils," argues Lesoinne, "the mystery of love and of life: to know (yourself) and to be released of your pain, you must not close yourself in solitude, you must call and await unafraid the response of the other, you must let yourself be touched" (Lesoinne 161). The necessity of communicating with another shows the way in which healing can only occur within a communal context. It is also important to note that despite the fact that Wild has become tangible, the message she conveys to the narrator remains "secret" and part of the slave sublime as it acknowledges that some things forever remain inexpressible.

The narrator, however, does not contain this unreadable letter from Wild. Rather, she attempts to continue to implicate the community as a whole, and the reader, within the healing of the slave sublime. The narrator transmits the impression of this message through the inclusion of systematic silences and the recognition that mere words, even those inflected by the cadences of the slave sublime, will never adequately convey both the pain and healing capacity of the slave sublime. These gaps and silences are represented formally through "blank spaces, 'crevices' (227) in between the different sections. These signs/sighs of 'in-betweenness' . . . are no mere 'empty' sets, however. As tuning-in moments and turning points, they are potentially fraught with the richest interplay between music and storytelling, or more specifically, what lies beyond"

(Paquet-Deyris 227). By maintaining silences that speak more than words are able to, the text is able to point toward the failure of even the slave sublime to fully encapsulate the experiences of the African-American community. The narrator more explicitly represents the failure of any discourse to convey the traumas of slavery that continue to haunt the cultural unconscious of the African-American community when she cites her own failures as a storyteller. The acknowledgment of this failure, however, does more than simply repudiate the hegemonic language, but in fact shows "the narrator's good faith toward the community precisely in her acknowledged failure to represent it according to the measure of her own textually determined fatalism, a failure signaled by her characters' power to evade a narrative logic of repetition and retribution" (Nowlin 165). The rejection of language for the sake of the healing of the community can be seen when the narrator claims: "I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder? Without aching words that set, then miss, the mark? . . . It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human. I missed the people altogether" (219-220). Though the words the narrator uses seem to "ache" with the weight of the history they convey, the voice of the City, and the inhabitants of the City, still defy direct representation and continually "miss the mark." By admitting that the narrator, and by extension narrative itself, is "doomed" to miss "the people altogether," the narrator restores subjectivity to the members of her community.

Not only does the narrator offer the chance to claim ownership of one's self to the characters in the novel by setting them free of linguistic bounds through the slave sublime, but this freedom is also offered to the reader. This can be seen in the novel's closing passage:

> I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it – to be able to say out loud what they have have no need to say at all . . . *Talking to you and hearing you answer – that's the kick.* But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (Morrison 229)

The secret that the narrator longs to share with the reader is the secret and coded language of the slave sublime, and knowing the code one can use to confront a horrific past and share that "inside nothing" with another in order to find healing and community – that's the kick. The fact that this secret cannot be explicitly stated by the narrator reveals the fact that there will always be aspects of this past that cannot be expressed, but the power of healing rests in the attempt to do so. "Exactly like the elliptical suggestion at the end of *Beloved* that this is not a story to pass on, this closing passage resists any literal interpretation," and as a result, the unread message remains a part of the indescribable nature of the slave sublime (Hardack 464). "Throughout *Jazz*," Richard Hardack explains, "the parts of us we do not know, the music that perpetually comes to us unbidden, that was written for us before we were born, remains the music the world makes through our bodies. This music finds its purpose in our pain, in our fragmentation,

but it also heals these wounds" (466). This music is the slave sublime "that was written before we were born" and "finds its purpose in our pain, in our fragmentation" and also "heals these wounds." The use of the slave sublime in this context works to counteract the repression of the past and the failure of language to heal these wounds, while also creating "an alternate understanding of belonging and community" (Albrecht-Crane 61). Much like the inhabitants of the City who use the slave sublime in order to navigate their new urban setting by "treat[ing] language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play," (33) "the power of this novel lies in its remarkable capacity to facilitate linguistic play and to engage in a communal experience with the reader that defies the [hegemonic] discourse" (Albrecht-Crane 71). In order to engage with this past, one must decode and communicate through the slave sublime in order to convey and comprehend the unsayable. The narrator of *Jazz* underscores the importance of this engagement through her own search for Wild. Through this confrontation with Wild, the narrator gains redemption, and extends this redemption to the reader, by passing on the unreadable letters from Wild which are transmitted using the transcendent nature of the slave sublime. Much like the redemption alluded to in the conclusion of *A Mercy* and offered by Baby Suggs and the community in *Beloved*, healing can only occur through a confrontation with this unspeakable past and a rebirth into the African-American community using the codes of the slave sublime.

"Beyond the Eternal": Broader Implications of the Slave Sublime

Throughout Toni Morrison's corpus exists an insistence on the power of a signifying force that transcends the merely linguistic. This non-linguistic mode of communication is used by narrators and characters alike in her novels in order to express traumas that exhaust the resources of language and to assist damaged and disenfranchised African-American individuals in recovering from the psychological and physical scars of slavery and its aftermath within the context of the healing powers of the African-American community. For these reasons, I chose to call this insistence signifying force "the slave sublime" as articulated by Paul Gilroy. The use of this term highlights not only the importance of using codes that exist outside of the hegemonic language to communicate traumas and facilitate healing, but also the way in which this sublime code is able to transcend the boundaries of time and space, offering individuals a way to confront inexpressible past traumas, a mode of communicating those traumas in the present to an active listener within a communal context, while also creating a space for future healing, as these painful past expressions will continue to haunt and potentially heal the African-American community by facilitating an engagement with this unspeakable, but not unsayable past.

This thesis demonstrates the ways in which Morrison incorporates the non-linguistic code of the slave sublime through the use of music, dance, colors, and scars

within *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* in order for her characters to create solidarity and foster healing from the traumatic past of slavery and its aftermath for themselves as well as the African-American community without reinforcing the hegemonic language. It is my belief that the slave sublime is an integral aspect of Toni Morrison's works. An analysis of Morrison's use of the slave sublime in her other novels could lead to fruitful new ways to consider her contribution to contemporary African-American fiction. As such, by way of conclusion, I briefly offer examples of the slave sublime within Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and her recent novel *Home* in order to underscore the importance of continuing to trace the slave sublime in her fiction.

A striking example of the use of the slave sublime in Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* can be seen in the infamous birthmark above the eye of the novel's titular character. Sula's birthmark, like the "chokecherry tree" scar on Sethe's back and the "hoofmarks" on Dorcas' face, functions as a non-linguistic sign with a multiplicity of meanings to those in her community. One of the most interesting facets of this birthmark is the fact that as a mark, it is supposed to represent singularity; it is the thing that makes Sula distinct. This can be seen in the initial description of her birthmark "that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. It gave her otherwise plain face a broken excitement and blue-blade threat" (52). Yet this defining feature of her face is in fact the thing that allows others to define her. Throughout the narrative, members of the community of the Bottom continually create a narrative about what this

birthmark symbolizes. Before he is seduced by Sula, Nel's husband Jude compares her birthmark to a snake on several occasions: "this slight woman, not exactly plain, but not fine either, with a copperhead over her eye," followed by "and that wide smile took some of the sting from that rattlesnake over her eye" (103-4). Jude's interpretation of the birthmark evokes images of the garden of Eden, the temptress embodied by Sula with the snake-like marking. Shadrack similarly transforms Sula's birthmark into a sign he finds legible based on what he desires from their relationship: "She had a tadpole over her eye (that was how he knew she was friend – she had the mark of the fish he loved)" (156). Sula's birthmark serves as a site for the creation of narrative, a form of abstract art on which the viewer projects their own desires. This projection also serves as a site of communal bonding, though at the expense of Sula, when the community looks for reasons to validate their belief that Sula is evil incarnate: "That incident, and Teapot's Mamma, cleared up for everybody the meaning of the birthmark over her eye: it was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah's ashes marking her from the very beginning" (114). Similar to the power claimed by Schoolteacher in *Beloved* when he states that "definitions belong to the definers – not the defined," the community of the Bottom uses discourse, in this instance the discourse of the slave sublime, as they attempt define the non-linguistic sign that is Sula's scar, in order to justify their subhuman treatment of Sula. This is to say that language, and potentially even the non-linguistic code of the slave sublime, can be manipulated and warped by fear and anger, resulting in the alienation of

members of the African-American community rather than the creation of solidarity typically associated with the use of the slave sublime in Morrison's work.

In contrast to the community's incessant need to project meaning onto the feared and othered figure of Sula by way of her birthmark, Sula herself never explains what she thinks her mark means, even when we see her looking into the mirror when she feels love, or possession, for the first time, her gaze never falls on this mark. Sula's refusal to define her defining feature can be read as what Cynthia Dobbs referrs to as "subversive semiotics." She argues that "in our current vocabulary, we could read this 'code' as a subversive semiotics in the face of a seemingly hegemonic symbolic order" (567). Sula's birthmark exists outside the realm of language, yet inspires many narratives to be created in order to situate and thereby contain this dangerously free character. By refusing to give a definition to her own mark, Sula also refuses to translate her non-linguistic signifier into the language of the hegemonic, symbolic order. This tension between the community's exclusionary enactment of the slave sublime and Sula's refusal to render the non-linguistic into language is certainly worth an investigation that lies beyond the scope of this examination.

Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* contains a plethora of moments in which we see the slave sublime enacted in a communal context. One particularly poignant moment can be seen early in the novel when Macon Dead Jr. finds himself irresistibly drawn to the house of his estranged sister Pilate:

> Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet. Surrendering to the sounds, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. (28-9)

This passage highlights the "sublime" aspect of the slave sublime as Macon finds himself simultaneously repelled and attracted by the sounds of the family he has rejected. Despite Macon's stern ways and his refusal to bend for anyone, we see a moment of weakness brought on by something that exists outside of the realm of commerce and the hegemonic language. Macon focuses solely on money, on the concrete and tangible, but in this scene he is pulled back into the African-American community he shuns and surrenders to the message conveyed through the slave sublime. The simile of the magnet also connects the slave sublime to the theme of flight and return that we see throughout the novel. Flight can be seen either as an escape, like Solomon's flight out of slavery and the opening scene of the novel in the suicide of a salesman, or as a confrontation, as evidenced by Milkman's final leap towards Guitar. While these flights are made as acts of desperation, the flight by Macon towards his sister's house is an involuntary one. This involuntary flight by Macon towards his deserted family parallels the later flight made by Milkman to his ancestral home which is also facilitated by the slave sublime. Despite the fact that Milkman searches for gold near his family's property in Pennsylvania, he is involuntarily drawn to Butler Mansion, the home of the people who killed his ancestors

and stole their property, by the song of Solomon sung by children he encounters on the street. It is there that Milkman finds Circe, an ancestor figure akin to Baby Suggs, who relates to Milkman his family's history, thus reintegrating Milkman into the African-American community as he returns home (240-8). Attempts to resist the transcendent pull of the slave sublime and the way in which the slave sublime appears to thwart the desires of those who do not wish to hear its undeniable call is also a worthy avenue to pursue in investigating Morrison's use of non-linguistic communication within an African-American communal context.

Morrison's use of the slave sublime evolves in a fascinating way that merits further exploration in her 2012 novel *Home*. In this novel, Morrison strengthens the bond between the slave sublime and the African-American community through the jarring absence of the slave sublime in the beginning of the narrative while Frank Money is in exile from his community. Frank's refusal to confront his dark past as a soldier in the Korean War and to embrace his community of Lotus results in this absent presence of the slave sublime within the narrative. This absence of the slave sublime is indicative of Frank's rejection of his home of Lotus as the slave sublime is always rooted in the communal within Morrison's work.

The absent presence of the slave sublime is felt from the very start of the narrative. While Frank is in an asylum, he attempts to play dead in order to escape. In order to do so, Frank must reject all things associated with the slave sublime: "the trick of

imitating a semi-coma, like playing dead facedown in a muddy battlefield, was to concentrate on a single neutral object. Something that would smother any random hint of life" (7). Frank must repress things associated with colors, prosody, and anything related to the emotional field of the slave sublime. Upon his successful escape and whilst on the train towards Lotus, we again see the glaring and systematic absence of the slave sublime: "Frank watched the flowers at the hem of her skirt blackening and her red blouse draining of color until it was as white as milk. Then everybody, everything. . . All color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen" (23). Much like Sethe in *Beloved* who sees the red baby's blood and then can no longer see color, Frank's trauma causes him to see only "blood red" and then nothing (20). As a result of Frank's madness, which is caused by his repression of the atrocities he committed during the war as well as his isolation from his community, he is unable to sustain the intensity of emotions associated with reading the non-linguistic signs of the slave sublime.

A shift in this absence of the slave sublime occurs the closer Frank gets to home. This is most apparent in the scene in which he enters a bar in Atlanta where music is being played. After watching the drummer get dragged off the stage in a frenzy, Frank relates this experience to his impending confrontation with Dr. Beau, a former Confederate who practices eugenics and has performed experiments on Frank's sister Cee: "Maybe, as with the drummer, rhythm would take charge. Maybe he too would be escorted away, flailing helplessly, imprisoned by his own strivings" (110). Frank applies

the slave sublime to his own experiences as opposed to repressing it for the first time, but still fears that embracing the slave sublime will result in extreme violence and a loss of self-control. It is not until he rescues his sister Cee from Dr. Beau and returns to Lotus that he is able to embrace, and be embraced by, the slave sublime: "Crimson, purple, pink, and China blue. Had these trees always been this deep, deep green?" (117). Frank's recognition of color is mirrored by the way in which both the community and the slave sublime embrace him: "color, silence, and music enveloped him" (118). The fact that Frank no longer needs to repress the slave sublime and the graphic memories it evokes non-linguistically leads to his confession in the following chapter of his murder of a Korean child (124). The absence of the slave sublime until Frank returns home and embraces both his troubled past and his forsaken community reveals the way in which Morrison continually links the slave sublime to the healing powers of the African American community.

It is clear that the slave sublime is a major motif within the works of Toni Morrison and highlighting the usage and function of the slave sublime in Morrison's novels may shed light on the way in which contemporary African-American novelists struggle with the tension between writing in the hegemonic language that is saturated with a history of oppression of the people they seek to reconstruct and the desire to tell these stories that defy direct representation. As a result of this collusion of language with white hegemony's control, Morrison and other contemporary African-American artists

incorporate the slave sublime into their novels and place it firmly within the context of the healing powers of the African-American community. Despite the fact that the horrors of slavery and the psychic wounds it leaves on slaves and their descendants can never be fully articulated, the attempt to communicate this suffering within a communal context using the slave sublime enables future generations to engage with this repressed past through the acknowledgment that though these sublime messages cannot be read through traditional literacy, the notion of the importance of reading non-linguistic signs transcends both linguistic and non-linguistic barriers. The use of the slave sublime rooted in collective memory speaks not only to a central element of Morrison's fiction, but also to the ways in which the codes of the slave sublime within an African-American communal context harbor the stories of our ancestors in historical reality. This sentiment is evoked by Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden" as she claims: "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not read plainly" (240). The acknowledgment of the fact that many of our ancestors "could not read plainly" and therefore had to seek alternative modes of communicating their histories attests to the importance of non-linguistic modes of communication within the African-American tradition. Walker concludes her essay with the praises of these women for "how they knew what we *must* know without knowing a page of it themselves" (242-3). We are the recipients of incredibly important

letters that exist outside of language; Morrison's awareness of this gift is being transmitted to the readers of her work, and that is the greatest gift of all.

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