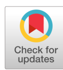

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ARTICLE

An Ineffable Haunting: Language, Embodiment, and Ghosts in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Abstract

Rereading Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, this article explores how Morrison's work at the limits of language performs the haunting ties between the Reconstruction era and the present day by offering readers a way to experience a rememory of their own. By repeatedly emphasizing the inadequacy of language in expressing traumatic experience, *Beloved* encourages its readers to, like its characters, look beyond language and seek out a kind of ineffable, embodied knowledge to better understand the lingering traumas of slavery. Through Morrison's concept of "invisible ink," which points to the inevitability that lived experience cannot be captured in language by the author alone but must be filled in by an active reader, this article makes a larger argument: that *Beloved* acts as both an invitation and a guide to read the ghostly, invisible ink of history that exists outside the novel, haunting our world itself.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; embodiment; haunting; ghosts; performance studies; critical fabulation; ineffability; invisible ink

"How can I say things that are pictures," asks the slave girl, desperately searching for "a hot thing," perhaps her mother's face.[1] Her question permeates through the pages of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, whose characters struggle against the impossibility of reckoning with their pasts, stained by the traumas of slavery. The failure of words to represent the past emerges as a consistent theme across Morrison's writing. This work at the limits of language is both an artistic and political project, perhaps evoked best in her essay "Invisible Ink," in which she probes "the way in which a reader participates in the text—not how she interprets it, but how she helps to write it."[2] Notably, this active mode of readership (reader-as-writer) depends just as much on what is written as what is not:

[1] Toni Morrison, Beloved, First Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 248.

[2] Toni Morrison, "Invisible Ink: Reading the Writing and Writing the Reading," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 347.

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> Writing the reading involves seduction—luring the reader into environments outside the pages. Disqualifying the notion of a stable text for one that is dependent on an active and activated reader who is writing the reading—in invisible ink.[3]

Lying "under, between, outside the lines, hidden until the right reader discovers it," invisible ink engages with the problem of representing the ineffable, or "say[ing] things that are pictures,"[4] by pointing to the inevitability that the totality of lived experience cannot be captured in language by the author alone, but must be filled in by an active reader. This article is an attempt to shine an ultraviolet light of sorts on some of the invisible ink I can see and to suggest that Morrison trains the reader how to read this invisible ink through the actions of her characters and the literary devices she deploys. First, I examine how *Beloved* strategically calls attention to the limits of language in the attempt to reimagine an unknowable past, creating what Saidiya Hartman calls "a counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical."[5] After attempting to locate Morrison's writing toward the limits of language in the genealogy of ineffability as a philosophical concept, I turn to Diana Taylor's work in the field of performance studies to better understand the body as a historically discredited site of ineffable knowledge. Following Joshua Landy's work on what fiction does to its readers, I argue that *Beloved* encourages its readers to, like its characters, seek out this embodied knowledge that cannot be captured by language. Finally, I suggest that the book acts as both an invitation and a guide to read the invisible ink of history outside the novel, in our world itself. The invisible ink of history lies in the words history refused to write or could not even write: the lives of enslaved Africans in the holds of a ship crossing the Atlantic, the impossible choice of a mother who murdered her own child to save her from the atrocities of slavery, and the untold experiences of the "Sixty Million and more," to whom Morrison dedicates the novel.[6] *Beloved* suggests that, while these ineffable histories may seem absent from everyday experience to some people, they haunt all of us. By learning to read the invisible ink of history that persists in the world all around us, we might be able to better reckon with the horror and brutality that continues to shape our world today.

***Beloved*'s "reach toward the ineffable"[7]**

> The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is

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[3] Morrison, "Invisible Ink," 350.

[4] Morrison, *Beloved*, 248.

[5] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe, Number 26* 12.2 (June 2008): 12.

[6] Morrison, *Beloved.*

[7] Toni Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 106.

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> sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. … language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. *Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.*[8]

Due in part to her Nobel lecture, much has been written on how language's seemingly paradoxical link to the ineffable materializes in Morrison's writing. Discussing Morrison's entire body of work, Claudine Raynaud explains that "The unspeakable, the unnamable remains unspoken, unuttered. Like Sethe, moving about the room, unable to get to the heart of her murderous gesture, the reader understands that language falls short, falters, fails."[9] Similarly, Abdellatif Khayati states that Morrison's work "strives to say the unsayable, and for this reason it may not always be verbal. It can be verbless, as well."[10] Language, for Morrison, functions as an index for ineffable experience, but she cautions against the hubris to assume that verbal signs can wholly (or even mostly) encompass that experience. To "reach toward the ineffable," the writer, instead, must write in invisible ink and provide space in which the reader can participate in the creation of the story, the imagining of what-might-have-been.

Morrison's work can be recognized as part of a larger project of reading the invisible ink of history that has flourished in the twenty-first century. Throughout her career, Saidiya Hartman has reckoned with the numerous blind spots of the historical archive concerning the interior lives of enslaved people. Because much of what we know about slavery comes from written accounts of the slavers, rather than experiential accounts from the slaves themselves, Hartman asks:

> How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it?[11]

Hartman's solution is a kind of writing at the intersection of history and fiction, which she calls *critical fabulation.* Hartman and Morrison's projects are distinct (the latter explicitly writing fiction), yet intertwined, and I suggest we might learn more about how *Beloved* works on its readers by viewing it as a kind of critical fabulation.

Working as an uncredited editor on *The Black Book*, a 1974 landmark encyclopedic account of Black life in American history, Morrison stumbled across a short newspaper clipping with the headline: "A VISIT TO THE SLAVE MOTHER WHO

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[8] Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," 106; emphasis added.

[9] Claudine Raynaud, "Toni Morrison (1931–2019): Reaching toward the Ineffable," *Transatlantica* 2 (2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.14962.

[10] Abdellatif Khayati, "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative," *African American Review* 33.2 (Summer 1999): 322.

[11] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.

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KILLED HER CHILD."[12] Baptist preacher P. S. Bassett recounts his visit with Margaret Garner, "that unfortunate woman" who had recently killed her infant to spare her the atrocities of enslaved life.[13] In Bassett's account, we see the bones of what eventually became *Beloved*,[14] but Morrison, like Hartman, is more compelled by what is left out of the account written, of course, not by Garner herself. Describing the process of searching for Garner in the historical archive, Morrison writes, "For a novelist that is the real excitement. Not what there is, but what there is not."[15] To write into this absence, Morrison "begins with something as ineffable and as flexible as a dimly recalled figure, the corner of a room, a voice" and "track[s] an image from picture to meaning to text."[16] These ineffable images:

> Surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written, and to the revelation of a kind of truth.[17]

We see here how *Beloved*, a work of historical fiction, looks beyond the historical archive to critically fabulate the interior lives of slaves and recently escaped slaves between 1855 and 1874, a period encompassing the end of legal slavery and the beginning of the profound failure that was Reconstruction. Morrison recasts Margaret Garner as Sethe, the infant child in Garner's arms as a fusion of Denver (her surviving child) and Beloved (the poltergeist still bearing the scar), and the mother-in-law as Baby Suggs in an imaginative effort to fill in the historical gaps with what might have been.

But it is important that Morrison doesn't fill these gaps *all the way*: at certain points, she leaves the reader in contingent spaces of possibility and unknowing, particularly toward the end of the novel. Here, a key component in Hartman's construction of critical fabulation is helpful: "*narrative restraint*, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure."[18] To provide closure is to mark the story as having ended, to reify yet another archival account as the definitive truth. Narrative restraint, however, leaves room for invisible ink.

In *Beloved*, narrative restraint manifests in the refusal to provide closure or redemption for Sethe. Responding to affirmations from Paul D, Sethe's last words in the novel come in the form of a disbelieving question: "Me? Me?"[19] At

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[12] Middleton A. Harris, ed., *The Black Book*, 25th ed. (New York: Random House, 2009), 10.

[13] Harris, *The Black Book*, 10.

[14] A mother attempting to kill her children to spare them, succeeding in killing only one; that mother holding a child with "a large *bunch* on her forehead," a visible scar of the attempted murder; a religious mother-in-law who "neither encouraged nor discouraged" the act because it was an impossible choice; and most importantly, a notable lack of remorse from the mother.

[15] Toni Morrison, "On Beloved," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 283.

[16] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 241.

[17] Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 240.

[18] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12; emphasis added.

[19] Morrison, *Beloved*, 322.

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best, we can read this as a suggestion that Sethe has started down the road to redemption, but we see no confirmation that she will achieve it.[20] Another example emerges in the four consecutive chapters toward the end of the novel when the third-person narrator seems to evaporate, giving way to direct first-person accounts. While the first chapter (Sethe's point of view) and second chapter (Denver's point of view) maintain the style of continuous prose we have seen thus far in the novel, the third chapter (Beloved's point of view) begins a gradual disintegration of fluid prose into fragmented poetry, removing punctuation, fracturing syntax, and making it progressively difficult to understand what is being referenced. This fragmentation of language culminates in the fourth chapter, in which it is often utterly unclear which of the three characters is narrating. Their subjectivities merge and overlap, and the interwoven narration refuses to make fully legible the family's complex dynamics and individual perspectives:

> You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
> I will never leave you again
> Don't ever leave me again
> You went in the water
> I drank your blood
> I brought your milk
> You forgot to smile
> I loved you
> You hurt me
> You came back to me
> You left me
> I waited for you
> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine[21]

We can see how the rhythmic, poetic language "make[s] way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale."[22] While the text offers some clues, we must deduce and imagine who is speaking, and we are left without an answer key to confirm our hypotheses. But rather than seeming like some confounding block of text we must decipher, this poetry invites us to piece together phenomena from earlier in the novel to imagine what cannot be stated definitively. The challenge to imagine, activated by close reading, tethers the unknowable past to the experienced present.

Hartman begins her book, *Scenes of Subjection*, by refusing to reproduce Frederick Douglass's well-known account of the beating of his Aunt Hester because the "theatrical language" usually used to describe the torture of Black

[20] Thanks to Professor Lanier Anderson for a version of this insight.

[21] Morrison, *Beloved*, 256.

[22] Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Fiction," in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 331.

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bodies "reinforce[s] the spectacular character of black suffering."[23] While Hartman believes these graphic linguistic accounts "inure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity,"[24] Fred Moten would later argue that Hartman's decision "not to reproduce the account … is, in some sense, illusory."[25] Their field-altering debate has been well-studied, but their point of convergence lies in Hartman's interest in "the ways we are called upon to *participate* in such scenes."[26] For Hartman, the explicit language that graphically reproduces these traumatic scenes can engender a mode of participation that produces a comfortable distance from Black suffering. Although *Beloved* certainly does not eschew the spectacle of Black suffering, I propose that its poetic prose produces an altered mode of participation that converts that comfortable distance into a haunting intimacy through its close attention to embodied knowledge as opposed to rhetorical description.

Referring to Sethe's immediate reaction to Schoolteacher's arrival to take her back into slavery, Ato Quayson articulates how Morrison reaches toward ineffable experience, without allowing "theatrical language" to distance the reader from the Sethe's pain:

> What she designates here as simple truth is also a profound collapse of language, for the "No. No. Nono. Nonono" also shows that in the precise moment of the event she is powered exclusively by a singular emotional motivation that refutes at once both language and referentiality.[27]

In this traumatic moment, Sethe's experience cannot be boiled down to reason or intelligibility but rather implies an embodied reaction that can only be "registered through the rhythmic repetition of single words or phrases that are themselves emptied of any particular referentiality."[28] We see here how Morrison's prose accentuates the inadequacy of language to express experience, especially traumatic encounters around slavery. Sethe's restrained spoken language constitutes only the visible tip of the iceberg that clues us into her emotional and embodied reaction that we are left to imagine. By calling attention to the limits of language in articulating ineffable experience, Morrison encourages her readers to participate, alongside her, in the fabulation of Sethe's interior life.

What Is Ineffability?

Analyzing the concept of ineffability through a philosophical lens, André Kukla engages with two conflicting arguments for ineffability: the argument

[23] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 2022), 1–2.

[24] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 1.

[25] Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 4.

[26] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 2; emphasis added.

[27] Ato Quayson, "Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's Beloved," in *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 205.

[28] Quayson, "Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's Beloved," 205.

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from epistemic boundedness ("that human minds have limitations on what they can think; and what we can't think we can't say") and the argument from mysticism ("that we (or some of us) possess knowledge that can't be put into words").[29] Although Kukla confirms both arguments support the existence of the ineffable, his definition of the ineffable "requires that there be facts that nobody can state to anybody—not even to oneself."[30] In my view, the reduction of ineffability to "facts" that cannot be stated in language is lacking compared to the kind of ineffability to which Morrison refers in her Nobel lecture, which implies an experiential quality. Kukla views the argument from mysticism through two "epistemic states: an 'intellectual' understanding which is as incapable of comprehending the truths of mysticism as our linguistic apparatus is of expressing them, and a 'super-intellectual' mode of apprehension which provides the vehicle for the mystical intuition."[31] It is telling that Kukla jumps to a "super-intellectual" mode of ineffable insight, rather than a non-intellectual or embodied mode of understanding experience. Kukla does not seem to entertain the idea that ineffable experience might not exist in the mind at all.

Many philosophical accounts locate the ineffable as far removed from human experience in the realm of mysticism. Instead, I want to reinsert ineffability at the core of human experience. The kind of ineffability I explore here does not quite fit into the definitions offered by the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, it may best be articulated by Baby Suggs. Early in the novel, we learn about Baby Suggs's weekly preaching in the Clearing, for which she becomes a leader in the community of free Black folk. Rather than preaching holy scripture or cautioning against sin by virtue of a religious morality, Baby Suggs instead directs the focus purely on the flesh. "Love it," she says, "Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it."[32] Placing the onus on the individual to love one's own body ("*You* got to love it."),[33] Baby Suggs begins to articulate a path toward liberation that does not rely on other people, institutions, or the law. But Baby Suggs ultimately cannot articulate this perspective through language:

> 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. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.[34]

Suggs clues her listeners (and the reader) into the ways the body can know what the mind cannot express through language or perhaps, more radically, what the mind cannot even think. The ineffable knowledge Baby Suggs

[29] André Kukla, *Ineffability and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 52.
[30] Kukla, *Ineffability and Philosophy*, 75.
[31] Kukla, *Ineffability and Philosophy*, 80.
[32] Morrison, *Beloved*, 103.
[33] Morrison, *Beloved*, 104.
[34] Morrison, *Beloved*, 104.

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enacts here is not intellectual or cognitive, but embodied. It can *only* be known through one's own bodily experience. How can embodied experience constitute knowledge? To answer this question, I turn to the field of performance studies and Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire.

Discredited Knowledge and the Repertoire

Seeking to "expand what we understand as 'knowledge,'"[35] Diana Taylor identifies a rift between two forms of knowledge: that of the *archive* ("supposedly enduring materials") and that of the *repertoire* ("embodied practice/knowledge").[36] Archival knowledge is what is often engaged with in the academy: written texts, forensic material, paintings, buildings, and so on. The archive is understood cognitively and has been the dominant container for historical knowledge. The *repertoire*, however, "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge."[37] Unable to be codified in words or recorded through archival methods, the repertoire is the domain of cultural memory and is "stored in the body."[38] The ineffable knowledge to which Morrison speaks exists in the repertoire more so than the archive.

Taylor's work joins a larger decolonial project to dismantle the hierarchical relationship between the authority of the written word and lived experience, a project in which Morrison also participates: "If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West … information dismissed as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' or 'sentiment.'"[39] Morrison combats the imperialistic use of language by centering Black folklore and oral tradition within her novels as meaningful forms of knowledge.[40] When the community of women comes to 124 to exorcise Beloved, Morrison puts a twist on the famous line from the New Testament: "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like."[41] This emphasis on a musicality that extends beyond strictly linguistic meaning inverts the established order that often places written knowledge above embodied experience.

This hierarchical problem is best exemplified when Sethe learns that Schoolteacher, book in hand, has been separating Sethe's animal characteristics from her human characteristics. As Khayati writes, "We can see that Schoolteacher's

[35] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

[36] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

[37] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

[38] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 24.

[39] Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Fiction," 331.

[40] Raynaud, "Toni Morrison (1931–2019)," 6.

[41] Morrison, *Beloved*, 305.

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letter, the imperial tool of his authority of naming, defining things and people, is juxtaposed in relation to Sethe's body."[42] In a critique of the English language's long history of enabling and enacting violence against slaves to uphold the institution of slavery, Morrison frames "Schoolteacher's divisive logic and pseudo-empirical scientism" as producing a physiological effect in Sethe's body.[43] Even though she does not know what the word *characteristic* means, Sethe understands the implication of Schoolteacher's language on a bodily level, rather than a cognitive one:

> I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. … My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp.[44]

Staging a profound contrast between the archive and the repertoire, between written knowledge and embodied knowledge, Morrison undermines the authority of the written word, exposing its inadequacy in expressing the experience of being enslaved and turning instead to metaphorical descriptions of physical pain (recalling the intense feeling of the little birds' poking her scalp when Schoolteacher arrives at 124 to return her to slavery).[45]

Black feminist scholars have long been theorizing about the body as a site of discredited knowledge, resisting what Patricia Hill Collins articulates as "the suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production."[46] Famously asserting that "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house,"[47] Audre Lorde turns inward instead, discovering an "ancient, non-european consciousness" and "those hidden sources of our power where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes."[48] It is no accident that Lorde persistently locates knowledge in the erotic, the sensual, "a body sense," which, like Morrison, she often cannot express but through poetry.[49] This embodied knowledge is not just about being in touch with one's body in the moment but can also tie the past to the present through bodily sensation in ways language cannot. Morrison defines "emotional memory" as

[42] Khayati, "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative," 274.

[43] Khayati, "Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative," 320.

[44] Morrison, *Beloved*, 228.

[45] Morrison, *Beloved*, 192.

[46] Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology," in *The American Tradition in Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2001), 195.

[47] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Feasterville Trevose, PN: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

[48] Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Feasterville Trevose, PN: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

[49] Audre Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Feasterville Trevose, PN: Crossing Press, 1984), 109.

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"what the nerves and the skin remember,"[50] and thus it is telling that Sethe's emotionally charged memories of her traumatic past frequently manifest in corporeal sensation rather than intellectual abstractions. Articulating the need for an epistemology that centers the nuances of ineffable, embodied experience, bell hooks writes:

> There is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance.[51]

From here, I pick up these epistemological priorities and suggest something of a tangible methodology of reaching toward the ineffable after the reader has read the novel's final haunting lines. Of course, as Kukla's philosophical account demonstrates, the ineffable implies a perceived limit to understanding. But ineffability does not necessarily entail incomprehensibility. As both performance studies and Black studies demonstrate, there *are other* ways of knowing. Acknowledging the ineffable and the limits of language makes room for the repertoire as a vital epistemological framework. Even if we accept that knowledge can be understood and stored in the body, the question remains: What is it exactly we are looking for? What is it that our bodies are supposed to learn? We must set aside these questions for the moment as we ask not what *Beloved means*, but what it *does* to its readers, and more importantly, *how* it does so.

Formative Fictions and Moving beyond the Book

If the ineffable is that which cannot be expressed within language, but which *can* be experienced inside the body and understood (even if in a way that exceeds legibility), the question I now explore is how *Beloved* invites and trains its readers to reach toward this ineffable knowledge, to read the invisible ink both within and without the text of the novel.

An appropriate starting place is Joshua Landy's book *How to Do Things with Fictions*, in which he argues against the prevalent convention of scholarship which claims that "fictions are designed to give [readers] useful advice" in the form of "propositional content, … expressible in declarative sentences."[52] To combat this widespread, didactic, and reductive approach to fiction, Landy advances a theory of "formative fictions."

> Rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by

[50] Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 242.

[51] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 91.

[52] Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

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> revelation—what they give us is *know-how*; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train.* They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters that serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are.[53]

Beloved is such a "formative fiction" in that it trains its readers to look outside of language for knowledge. As we have seen, Baby Suggs's dancing in the Clearing, the community's singing their wordless exorcism, and Sethe's embodied understanding of Schoolteacher's intent (without understanding the semantic content of his speech) all demonstrate various methods of "reach[ing] toward the ineffable."[54] Together, these characters offer a road map toward seeking out this kind of embodied knowledge.

There is, however, much more to this formative fiction than its semantic content. In "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," Richard Moran argues that rhetorical and formal features, such as the heavily stylized and poetic prose in *Beloved*:

> Provoke the mind to *do* various things (relating, contrasting, calling up thoughts) … Both vividness and the emotional engagement with fictions should be seen as, irreducibly, aspects of the manner of one's imagining, and not as part of the content of what is imagined.[55]

It is not controversial to say that the *manner* in which Morrison activates our imagination is affective, sensory, and embodied. Morrison's rhetorical style scripts a certain kind of engagement with its semantic content, and with this, we can understand that the work of *Beloved* is not primarily situated in the semantic content of what-it-might-have-been-like for Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. The more important and more unique work of *Beloved* is to prompt the reader to see the world differently, to approach the what-it-might-have-been-like from a totally different perspective and methodology, one beyond the confines of language.

This is a fine and perhaps paradoxical line for a writer to walk—to use language to point to the limits of language—but Morrison walks the line exquisitely. In *Beloved*, this effort becomes actualized on the level of the narration, especially in the section previously described when the prose breaks down into fragmented poetry. As Beloved's thoughts, impulses, and desires splinter and struggle to take shape, we begin to infer that the murdered Beloved lies in the hold of a slave ship. While ostensibly referencing the Middle Passage, the narration refuses to render Beloved's interior experience as something that can

[53] Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 10.

[54] Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," 106.

[55] Richard Moran, "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," in *The Philosophical Imagination: Selected Essays*, online edition (New York: Oxford Academic, 2017) 3–25, at 13.

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be fully articulated; rather, it highlights language's inability to do so, while offering enough subtle hints, sensory traces, and affective suggestions that the reader is forced to actively imagine the experience of the Middle Passage from Beloved's vantage point. Morrison refuses to allow us to passively absorb a fixed, predefined narrative as one might with a traditional historical account—we must critically fabulate as well.

So far, I have focused primarily on how *Beloved* trains its readers to recognize the limits of language in expressing experience, to read the invisible ink hidden within the text, and to reach toward the ineffable knowledge that can be found in and understood by one's body. But this is not all. I suggest Morrison is also attempting a much larger project of healing the American consciousness in the wake of slavery, one that will continue to require action well beyond turning the pages of *Beloved.* As Landy writes about formative fictions:

> There are the delayed-release effects that slowly stretch out, like long tendrils, into the future of our life. The immediate impact of formative fictions is always subtle; their overall impact, if we take them up on their offer, is as diffuse as it is profound. Formative fictions begin from the assumption that there are, in life, no quick fixes.[56]

Certainly, for the American consciousness, the project of healing does not entail any "quick fixes..." The work *Beloved* encourages must be taken up after we have read the novel and must be continually renewed probably for the rest of our lives. But as Saidiya Hartman reminds us, critical fabulation "has as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished, and provisional character of this effort."[57] *Beloved* offers a path forward in this effort through the lively and haunting intimacy it stages between the past and present.

Rememory, Haunting, and Footprints

> It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.
>
> "Can other people see it?" asked Denver.

[56] Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 14.
[57] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

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> "Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you."[58]

In this final section, I propose that *Beloved* provokes and trains its readers to search for a collective rememory of the atrocities of slavery and the failures of reconstruction. Importantly, this collective rememory must be experienced as *ineffable* and *embodied.*

In *Beloved*, rememory is expressed obliquely through sensory, affectively charged description. Examining the novel's first instance of rememory, when Sethe is walking through a field and is suddenly transported back to Sweet Home, Quayson notes the "intensification of Sethe's perspectival sensorium and thus of her consciousness of her immediate surroundings" in the ways the prose vividly highlights smell, tactile sensation, sound, and sight.[59] As an equally intense rememory of Sweet Home replaces Sethe's present experience, Quayson articulates that "the procedure by which the past is incorporated into the present … appears to be specifically designed to attribute sensual and affective intensity to stray thoughts and observations."[60] I contend that this emphasis on "sensual and affective intensity" represents an oblique approach to an otherwise ineffable experience of trauma. As Morrison states, "Although [language's] poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie."[61] As vividly as the sequence is described, there is still an ineffable quality about it that forces us to understand rememory primarily as a sensory, embodied experience, no matter how many evocative images may be attached to it.

Recognizing this limitation of language is and should be a humbling experience—a reminder that the history books and most of our written understandings of lived experience are profoundly limited as long as they remain primarily intellectual. As usual, Morrison says it best: "Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so."[62] Notably, Sethe describes rememory as something that is triggered by kinesthesis and physical location, as opposed to any mental or associative processes. She says that rememory is "out there. Right in the place where it happened," and even if you have never been there before, you can "*bump into* a rememory that belongs to somebody else."[63] I am reminded of the last page of

[58] Morrison, *Beloved*, 43–44.

[59] Quayson, "Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's Beloved," 195.

[60] Quayson, "Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's Beloved," 195.

[61] Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," 106.

[62] Morrison, "The Nobel Lecture in Literature," 106.

[63] Morrison, *Beloved*, 43.

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the novel, after Beloved has been exorcised and then forgotten, wherein Morrison furthers this idea of rememory as an embodied, kinesthetic experience:

> Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. … Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.[64]

Here, rememory is tactile: it is something one can "touch." Rememory is proprioceptive—it can be stepped into, like a footprint. "Familiar" rememories are "out there" in the stream behind 124, as they are scattered all over the United States, where the legacy of slavery lives on in ways both obvious and unseen.

Knowing full-well that I cannot pin down this ineffable and embodied experience of rememory, I can only gesture toward what it is we are supposed to be rememory-ing. In her essay "On *Beloved*," Morrison states that "the single most uncontroversial thing one can say about the institution of slavery vis-à-vis contemporary time, is that it haunts us all."[65] *Beloved* is a ghost story, a story of a haunting. Beloved the character begins as a poltergeist living in 124, haunting the walls and floorboards, and once Paul D exorcises her from the house, she materializes in human form. But even after she is exorcised again and is eventually forgotten, she remains in the footprints down in the stream. Beloved has not gone away: the rememory of her still haunts the land. In this way, we can think of rememory and haunting as two interlinked processes of engaging with the past that is simultaneously present and absent. Morrison writes:

> When finally I understood the nature of a haunting—how it is both what we yearn for and what we fear, I was able to see the traces of a ghostly presence, the residue of a repressed past in certain concrete but also allusive detail. Footprints particularly. That disappear and return only to disappear again.[66]

The temptation here is to think of this haunting in the abstract, or as a heightened, mystical concept, removed from reality. Indeed, *Beloved* is often labeled as "fantastical," or "magical realism," and, while the novel of course operates through the mode of magical realism, I suggest that the haunting it evokes is quite real. I am reminded of fantasy and science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's acceptance speech for a lifetime achievement award. Responding to

[64] Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.
[65] Morrison, "On Beloved," 283.
[66] Morrison, "On Beloved," 284.

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the tendency of the awards to go to "the so-called realists," Le Guin speaks in her distinctive quiet, but unyielding way:

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, who can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—*realists of a larger reality.*[67]

In the spirit of this "larger reality," I wonder if Morrison means for us to experience this haunting "out there" in the world—materially, sensorially, kinesthetically, *in real life.* In the novel, the haunting takes corporeal form in the body of Beloved, but we should not take this as a reason to dismiss the possibility of a true haunting from our reality. It must be said that this insight may not seem new at all to some readers who already do experience this haunting in very tangible ways. But those of us who might be inclined to dismiss the realism of this haunting may need to enlarge our own reality and reconsider which kinds of knowledge we might be discrediting. Emphasizing the tactile quality of footprints in the last sentences of the novel, Morrison tells us exactly what Sethe tells Denver: the knowledge exists "out there," down by the stream, "waiting for you."[68]

Bumping into a haunting rememory can create a host of complications to which Sethe, Denver, and Paul D can attest. As Sethe's experience shows, stepping into a rememory can be just as traumatic as the experience being remembered. Because Sethe asserts that one can bump into the rememory of someone else, *Beloved* expresses at least a similar experience as that of many Black descendants of slaves in the present-day who remember the pain of their ancestors, often without ever intending to do so. And this pain can be experienced not just psychologically, but physically and traumatically.[69] While the experiences of rememory are varied to each individual, *Beloved* demonstrates that, because slavery "haunts us all," the haunting rememory of slavery and Reconstruction is one that any of us can bump into in our own way.[70]

Beloved does not just frame this rememory as a possibility, but advocates that we *should* step into this rememory. Avery Gordon's book *Ghostly Matters* traces the sociological implications of embracing a haunting, a ghostly trace of the past that lingers in the present.[71] For Gordon, hauntings produce affective experiences

[67] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Ursula's Acceptance Speech: Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters," National Book Foundation, November 9, 2014, https://www.ursulakleguin.com/nbf-medal; emphasis added.

[68] Morrison, *Beloved*, 44.

[69] Michael J. Halloran, "African American Health and Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome: A Terror Management Theory Account," *Journal of Black Studies* 50.1 (January 1, 2019): 45–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934718803737.

[70] Morrison, "On Beloved," 283.

[71] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

that clue us into the paradoxical feeling of forces that are present and absent at the same time. In her fourth chapter, in which Gordon goes looking for Beloved's ghost, she emphasizes the risk of the slippery slope of empathy that can lead some readers to empathize with the Black characters and vilify the white ones. To be clear, the danger is not the vilification of slaveowners, but that the contemporary repudiation of them can become locked in place, possibly allowing a white reader to feel "solid and secure that I am not that other Schoolteacher."[72] Gordon calls attention to Stamp Paid's consideration of the "jungle" that white slaveowners projected onto Black slaves. This violent jungle, marking a supposed lack of civilization and penchant for savage violence, "invaded the whites who had made it" and lies "hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling in places like 124."[73] This ghostly presence of a jungle of whiteness suggests to Gordon "that it is our responsibility to recognize just where we are in this story, even if we do not want to be there."[74] For white readers, stepping into Schoolteacher's footprints and feeling his "seething presence" can and should be an unsettling experience,[75] but a necessary one. Through narrative restraint, Morrison lays the groundwork for white readers to accept that we may not be able to completely understand this ghost, and certainly will not be able to fully express the experience in words. The challenge Morrison offers is to embrace the haunting despite the mood of contingent and, indeed, frightening possibility it entails.

But it is not just the specter of slavery that haunts the pages of *Beloved*, but also, for Sethe, the ghost of infanticide. When Sethe finally recognizes Beloved as her daughter, she, "smiling at the things she would not have to remember now," mistakes Beloved's apparition for forgiveness of her act of murder.[76] It becomes apparent, as Beloved parasitically feeds on Sethe's energy, that redemption is not that simple. What also comes to fore, given Sethe's visceral relief when Beloved returns ("I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all"), is that Sethe has neither fully mourned her daughter's death nor entirely accepted her own responsibility for it.[77] It is not until Beloved has been exorcised out of 124—her loss described as an eerily material presence of "a bleak and minus nothing. More like absence"—that Sethe can truly begin to come to terms with her own haunting.[78] Gordon ultimately advocates that readers open ourselves up to hauntings and follow the ghost because "to be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine … that it could have been and can be otherwise."[79] In this imaginative act lies a haunting's "utopian grace," wherein the haunted experientially recognize a

[72] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 187.
[73] Morrison, *Beloved*, 234–35; quoted in Gordon, 187.
[74] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 188.
[75] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.
[76] Morrison, *Beloved*, 214.
[77] Morrison, *Beloved*, 216.
[78] Morrison, *Beloved*, 318.
[79] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 57.

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"something-to-be-done."[80] For Sethe, the true mourning and reckoning with her own past actions, put off for eighteen years, is this "something-to-be-done," something, we can hope, she will pursue "in the name of a will to heal."

Beloved's ghost haunts each of the characters in unique ways, wrenching each of their pasts into the present. So too can the ghosts of past atrocities haunt each of us, wrenching our relationships with the historical past into present awareness, but only if we follow the ghosts. As Quayson insists, "If rememory is a requirement for acknowledging slavery's affective leakage into history, … interpretation has to thus be experiential as much as epistemological and must issue in praxis in the present rather than merely in the knowledge of the past."[81] I want to add onto this notion that this praxis is the embodied experience of seeking the ghost, of attempting to step into the rememory, of refusing to allow the haunting rememory of slavery (or, in Sethe's case, infanticide) to be forgotten, to "pass on."[82]

In the epilogue, the fictional narrator of the rest of the novel seems to dissolve away so Morrison can write directly to us. Blurring the line between the historical-fictional time of the novel and the present moment in which the reader encounters the text, she repeats a very similar sentence three times throughout the last two pages regarding the story of Beloved: "It was not a story to pass on."[83] I conclude by offering three separate readings of these three sentences.

"It was not a story to pass on."[84]	To *pass on*: to retell the story to other people.
"It was not a story to pass on."[85]	To *pass* on: to overlook this story, as the historical record has overlooked embodied rememories as a valid form of knowledge.[86]
"This is not a story to pass on."[87]	To pass *on*: to pass away, to be lost to the void of time.

If the first reading is a *reflection* of what happened (Beloved's story stopped being retold and was forgotten), and the second reading is a slight *admonition* of what shouldn't have happened (Beloved's story should not have been overlooked the way it was), then the third reading is an *imperative*: we, in the present tense, *must not* let Beloved's story pass on to the realm of the forgotten. "This is not a story to pass on" implies that, because the rememory is out there in the world, the story isn't going away, whether we forget it or not. We will be haunted, whether we want to be or not. The only question is if we are willing to recognize

[80] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
[81] Quayson, "Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's Beloved," 203.
[82] Morrison, *Beloved*, 43. "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay."
[83] Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.
[84] Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.
[85] Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.
[86] Thanks to Professor Ato Quayson for this reading.
[87] Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.

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the haunting, to open ourselves up to the ghosts. We can pretend we are not being haunted by slavery (one need only tune into right-wing news outlets to see this alternative reality being advanced). We can dive into the textual history of slavery and learn all we can from the archive, but the point I am arguing, indeed the point *Beloved* drives home, is that understanding this written knowledge is far from the same kind of encounter as facing the ghost, as bumping into a rememory. All Morrison can do in words is to train us to read this ghostly, invisible ink and point us in the right direction.

Reading this novel in 2023, after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black people by police officers have exposed, yet again, the ongoing racial injustice in the United States, the ghosts of slavery, racial violence, and particularly the actions of people like Schoolteacher feel ever-present. As many argue ever more insistently that the past bears little influence on the present, Hartman reminds us that if critically fabulating a story of an enslaved girl has any value, "It is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers."[88] Reading *Beloved* emphasizes those haunting ties between the past and the present by offering a way to experience a rememory of our own outside of words. Ultimately, Morrison calls on her readers to, each in our own way, seek out the ghost in an effort toward a "something-to-be-done" that might lead toward a larger healing.[89] To seek out the ghost, *Beloved* invites us to heighten our bodily awareness, to broaden our horizons, to enlarge our reality so that, when we step into Beloved's footprint and feel her ghostly presence (perhaps a "clamor for a kiss?"),[90] we will *know* it in our bodies, even if language cannot express that haunting feeling.

Competing interest. This author declares none.

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[88] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.
[89] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
[90] Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.

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