

TRACING THE ARC: REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVE CHILDREN IN TWENTIETH-
CENTURY AMERICAN HISTORIES AND FICTIONS

by

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(Under the Direction of Barbara McCaskill)

ABSTRACT

My thesis will trace the literary and historical depictions of slave children, beginning with twentieth-century monographs on slavery and the oral and written slave narratives that historians have utilized in their research. By analyzing varied portrayals of slave children in historical studies, I will explain the flaws in early work by White scholars and trace the responses of African American scholars such as Willie Lee Rose, John Blassingame, and Herbert Gutman. I will execute close readings of two contemporary novels that feature slave children as prominent characters: Ernest Gaines's *Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). I will examine the effectiveness of the novelists who imaginatively attempt to fill gaps in the historical scholarship on the subject of slave children. My research focuses on how African American historians and writers have responded to the pervasive apologist rhetoric of slavery.

INDEX WORDS: Slave Children

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Eartha Allen.

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INTRODUCTION

TRACING THE ARC: REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVE CHILDREN IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN HISTORIES AND FICTIONS

In a panel discussion entitled “The Uses of History in Fiction” (1969), Ralph Ellison once argued that while time is the ally of the historian, it is the enemy of novelists, who seek only to manipulate or destroy it. This rearrangement of time grants creative writers “a special, though difficult freedom.”¹ Liberated from the shackles of chronology and written documentation, they are able to analogize events from different periods in order to foreground the significance of symbolism and cyclical patterns, and explore the interior lives of their subjects. In examining slaves’ abbreviated childhoods, writers can thus uncover similarities between contemporary and historical events. For example, by reshaping time within their fictions, they might show how slavery impacted Civil Rights-era children. Ernest Gaines and Toni Morrison are two contemporary writers whose work picks up where historians left off by lending voice to enslaved children. They simultaneously counter the notion that slaves in general were mentally and culturally deprived, and redefine the concept of innocence. By presenting slave children as what I describe as “prematurely mature,” Gaines and Morrison challenge historical scholarship that presents adult slaves as childlike and docile.

In 1965, the Department of Labor released a document composed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, entitled

¹ I am paraphrasing from Mark Singer’s article, “‘A Slightly Different Sense of Time’: Palimpsestic Time in *The Invisible Man*,” *Twentieth Century Literature*; 49.3 (Fall 2003): 388. Ellison’s original quote appears in “The Uses of History in Fiction,” *Southern Literary Journal* 1.2 (Spring 1969): 57-90.

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. The document, now known simply as *The Moynihan Report*, pared down the problems in the Black community to one fundamental issue: the dissolution of the African American family unit. According to Moynihan's study, nearly twenty-five percent of all Black households were headed by women, twenty-five percent of all Black children were born out of wedlock, and the percentage of Blacks dependent on government assistance was on the rise. One section in particular touched a nerve in the Black academy. Chapter Three, entitled "The Roots of the Problem," discusses the impact of slavery on the African American psyche, and relies heavily on Nathan Glazer's introduction to Stanley Elkins's infamous 1959 monograph, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*.

Elkins, the pre-eminent scholar on the subject of slavery during the 1960s, concluded that captivity so dramatically shifted the slaves' worldview that they were left without culture or the faculties to survive independently. Bondsmen and women, according to his research, were consigned to a perpetual state of childish docility:

Old values, thus set aside, could be replaced by new ones. It was a process made possible by "infantile regression"-regression to a previous condition of childlike dependency in which parental prohibitions once more became all-powerful and in which parental judgments might once more be internalized . . . It is no wonder that their obedience became unquestioning, that they did not revolt, that they could not "hate" their master.²

Moynihan's report concurred with this assessment and unintentionally catalyzed a decade-long campaign to prove the strength and worth of African American men, and, by extension, the Black family. *The Negro Family* had been leaked to the press by late

² Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 117, 122. I quote from the later edition of Elkins's monograph to show both the popularity of the text and the consistency of his views. Hereafter I will refer to Elkins's book within the text as *Slavery*.

summer 1965, just in time for news sources to use it to explain the causes of the Watts Riots in California. On August 27, 1965, John Herbers of the *New York Times* wrote, “Still unpublished in its entirety and still officially confidential, the [Moynihan] report has come in for new attention since the Los Angeles riots, for it pinpoints the causes of discontent in the Negro ghettos and says the new crisis in race relations is much more severe than is generally believed.”³ Because Civil Rights activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young had approved President Johnson’s well-received commencement speech on June 4, 1965, at Howard University, influenced by and largely based on Moynihan’s publication, no one had forecast the storm of fury that would result from the report itself.

What is more, the controversial Moynihan report brought negative attention to Stanley Elkins’s groundbreaking research, making his *Slavery* a prime target for up-and-coming historians. In 1970, the historian Willie Lee Rose argued that the Black father’s discounted influence in the slave community was the result of Eurocentric, patriarchal views like Elkins’s and Moynihan’s. John Blassingame debunked the myth of this Sambo persona in his *The Slave Community* (1972), and Herbert Gutman’s 1976 publication *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* spoke directly to the Moynihan Report, taking an almost militant stance in favor of the adaptive capacities of American slaves. The objective of their research was to disprove the theory that the developing trend of fatherless households in Black communities of the 1960s and 70s dated back to slavery. Gutman logically concluded that if the “tangle of pathology,” to which Moynihan referred, was pervasive in the Black community, it would have to have been more concentrated in urban Black communities just after the Civil War than it was

³ “Report Focuses on Negro Family,” *New York Times*, 27 August 1965, p. 13.

in the 1960s.⁴ Through careful examination of census records in Buffalo, New York, and New York City in 1850, 1860, 1870, 1905, and 1925, Gutman concluded that the importance of the double-headed Black family did not wane over time. While Gutman did not argue for the existence of nuclear families among the slaves, he did contend that the extended family played an effective role in the rearing of slave youth.

While each of these scholars made major contributions to the research on slavery, most notably validating the use of slave narratives in historical research, the generation as a whole fell victim to a perennial blind spot: none of them, in their exegeses of the Black family unit, allowed the voices of slave women to be heard. While the importance of strong male figures in the slave household has been an investigation worth pursuing, the reality is that the mother, more often than not, was in closer proximity for longer periods of time to her children than were slave fathers. Stephanie Camp, author of *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004), states that male slaves were frequently allotted the freedom to leave the home plantation to make deliveries or do work on other plots of land, while women were made to remain at the homestead.⁵ This type of labor division made it much easier for men to escape than women, and frequently created stronger bonds between mother and child than father and child. Those children who were deprived of both parents due to labor demands or auction block separations were still cared for by either wet nurses or elderly women. Thus, in turning a blind eye to the narratives of bondswomen, these scholars also blotted out the

⁴ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), xvii.

⁵ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 28-34.

histories of slave children, the continuum of behavior from youth into adulthood, and the manner in which primary socialization affected the development of slave personalities.⁶

To be fair, the dearth of secondary texts on slave children is due, in part, to the unreliability of primary documentation. Many historians and literary scholars have noted that nineteenth-century slave narrators' recollections of childhood, because they are infrequently calendar- or age-based, frustrate the process of discerning ex-slave authors' ages. In an article entitled "I was Born" (1985), the literary critic James Olney outlines the twelve most repeated literary devices in slave narratives; his first and fifth observations support the narrators' positions.⁷ Unsure of the dates of their birth, and

⁶ Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* (1985) is the first book-length monograph on the subject of slave women. She relies heavily on the WPA narratives, and admits, in the book's introduction, that "it is very difficult to find source material about slave women in particular." White also uses Harriet Jacobs' narrative to support her hypotheses on miscegenation and childhood. It is important to note that this is a pioneering work on multiple levels. First, the WPA narratives were not widely accepted by historians as a viable source of information for historical scholarship in 1985. The validation of the WPA narratives and women's narratives provided historians with source material to explore slave childhood at length. Secondly, Harriet Jacobs's narrative had been discredited by White's predecessors. She quotes Jacobs extensively even before Jean Fagan Yellin validated Jacobs' narrative in 1987. Critics of White's book have noted that she must intuit the significance of events as they relate to her subjects. Using terms like "must have," "probably," and "it is reasonable to assume" are imperative qualifiers for scholarship on slave women, just as it is for slave child research. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 23.

⁷

1. A first sentence beginning, "I was born..." then specifying place but *not a date of birth*;
2. *sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father*;
3. *description of a cruel master, mistress or overseer, details of first observed; whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims*;
4. *account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave- often "pure African" – who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped*; *an*
5. *of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write*; *record*
6. *description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion*;
7. *description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year*;

made to live with a state-imposed illiteracy, slaves were hardly equipped to position their recollections on a timeline. As such, defining a slave's childhood as a specific and quantifiable variable is complicated.

Further exacerbating the situation is planters' and overseers' usage of the terms "boy" and "girl" to describe a bondsman or bondswoman. The following excerpt from a planter's missive exemplifies the blurred line between youth and adulthood:

I have an unruly negro girl whom I am anxious to dispose of as soon as possible and supply her place. Will you be so good as to look out for me a breeding negro woman under twenty years of age. Also a young active negro man. If you cannot meet with the slaves aforesaid I will be willing to purchase a young or middle aged negro man with his wife and children. I shall be glad to hear from you immediately as the negro of who I wish to dispose is a very dangerous character.⁸

In this passage, the slave owner complicates the division between childhood and adulthood by requesting a breeding Black *woman under twenty years of age* to replace his unruly *girl*. It is unclear whether this slaveholder is using the terms "girl" and "woman"

-
- 8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven south;
 - 9. *description of patrols, of failed attempts to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;*
 - 10. *description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;*
 - 11. *taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;*
 - 12. *reflections on slavery.*

James Olney, "I was Born," *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 153.

Note that I do not discuss all twelve elements listed above, but that I have italicized the conventions that are applicable to the narratives I discuss, as well as those that apply to my later discussion on *Miss Jane Pittman* as a neo-slave narrative.

⁸ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xix.

interchangeably, or if the unruly girl to whom he refers is significantly younger than twenty years of age. The subsequent reference to a young or middle-aged Black man with his wife and children may imply that slave youth were expected to reproduce at a young age. Because it lacks clarity, however, the only reasonable function of this missive in an age-sensitive history text is to underscore the difficulty of defining the boundaries of slaves' childhoods.

Besides assumptions about the pathology of slave families and difficulties in discerning the ages of slaves, historians have also remained mindful of the margin for human error in recounting events that occurred decades before the ex-slaves were interviewed. Most scholars, for example, examine the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Federal Writers Project (FWP), and Fisk University (FU) interviews to analyze the slave youth experience. These accounts, however, were recorded approximately sixty-five years after Emancipation. Thus, the accuracy of the ex-slaves' recollections comes into question, as does the veracity of their remarks. Oftentimes the ex-slaves' narratives, relayed to White interviewers, were abridged in observance of contemporary deference rituals. Scholars have noted an openness in sessions that were conducted by Black researchers that is not present in those conducted by Whites.⁹ Equal consideration is given to the biases of the interviewers who included, discarded, and interpreted information as they deemed appropriate.

My thesis will compare and contrast depictions of slave children by twentieth-century historians and novelists. Chapter One follows the scholarly discussion of slavery

⁹ See Anthony S. Parent, Jr. and Susan Brown Wallace, "Childhood and Sexual Identity under Slavery," *American Sexual Politics: Sex Gender, and Race since the Civil War*, John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 21.

from *American Negro Slavery* (1918) by Ulrich B. Phillips, to the historians he influenced: Kenneth Stampp (*Peculiar Institution* 1956) and Stanley Elkins (*Slavery*, 1959). From there, I will turn my attention to the flood of responses to their research conducted primarily by African American scholars.

Chapters Two and Three provide close readings of Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1973) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) in order to emphasize the differences between literary and historical critics in their approaches to slave children's lives. Most notable is the fact that both Gaines and Morrison create characters who are female slave children in order to relay most fully the painful as well as inspiring details of bondage. My discussion will focus extensively on how African American child narrators in Gaines's and Morrison's novels are mature individuals who expose the previously silenced moments of enslaved childhoods and subvert apologist justifications of slavery.

CHAPTER ONE:

HIS STORY: SCHOLARLY SOURCES ON SLAVE CHILDREN

For decades following the Emancipation Proclamation, the subject of slave children had eluded scholars. It was not until the early 1970s that historians even considered a tangential discussion on slave children, one that was contextualized within the broader spectrum of slave families and communities. Those abbreviated treatments of the first fifteen years of slaves' lives tended to treat children as objects rather than subjects.¹⁰ To be clear, some historians researched the treatment of orphans by slaves and plantation owners, while others discussed the role of the father in rearing the child. It was not until the 1990s, more than a century after the debate had begun over the conditions of slavery and its consequences, that scholars attempted specific treatments of slave children.

Perhaps one of the most glaring reasons for this oversight is that the trend of scholarship has always been for generations of scholars to respond to the hypotheses and challenges launched by their predecessors. Until the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), there had been no discussion that suggested or warranted exploration of slave children. On April 17, 1970, the historian Willie Lee Rose presented her talk on "Childhood in Bondage" at the OAH meeting, and asserted that "we know much less than we ought to know about childhood in slavery, although nearly every

¹⁰ I have chosen to examine only the first fifteen years of slaves' lives for my discussion on childhood. Anthony S. Parent and Susan Brown Wallace in their "Childhood and Sexual Identity Under Slavery" argue, quite convincingly, that childhood ends with the advent of puberty, which, for slave girls, has been approximated at fifteen. In her "Slave Children of Texas," Elizabeth Rabe also defines childhood experience as any event occurring before age fifteen.

planter's diary, almost all travelers' accounts, and practically every fugitive slave narrative refer to the condition of children, often at length."¹¹ Within that statement is the answer to the underlying question that Rose presents. Fugitive slave narratives had not been legitimated by 1970, and so the only option left to historians would have been to write children back into the history of slavery with an extreme slant in favor of White slave owners and travelers. Rose meant to write a "big book" on slavery that would explore the complexities of slave personalities, beginning with childhood when "the slave acquired lifelong patterns of response to bondage – including how to accommodate and when to resist."¹² However, she suffered a severe stroke in 1978, and could not complete her project. Her challenge went unanswered for more than two decades.

I am in agreement with Rose, though I do not know if we would have pursued the subject of slave children for the same reasons. It is my position that Rose's generation of historians would have benefited from researching slave children, if for no other reason than to refute the assertions of their predecessors, who believed that adult slaves experienced a type of arrested development that rendered them childish for the duration of their lives. What better way to disprove that theory than to examine the advanced maturation process of children under an institution so harsh that it obliterates innocence within the first five to seven years of life?

In 1918, Ulrich B. Phillips published *American Negro Slavery*, a monograph that identifies slaves as docile and dependent, as closely resembling the Sambo character that pervaded American literature and theater at the turn of the century. According to Stanley Elkins, "Sambo was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but

¹¹ Willie Lee Rose, "Childhood in Bondage," *Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, x and 39, respectively.

chronically given to lying and stealing. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment.”¹³ Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, published in 1956, echoed these views of the personalities of enslaved men and women, but disagreed with his argument that the ills of slavery were wildly exaggerated. In 1959 Universal Library published Stanley Elkins’s highly controversial dissertation, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, which expanded upon Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution*, but introduced the idea that adult slaves developed this Sambo persona as a result of the harshness and cruelty of the slave system.

Though Elkins criticizes Phillips’s and Stampp’s presentations of Black personages on the plantation, his own conclusions are so similar that they suggest he explains rather than refutes his predecessor’s views. Elkins argues that the American slave system superseded the severity of Latin American slavery, since the former stripped its chattel of their African identity and independence – two factors that contributed to the development of the ubiquitous Sambo personality. As such, Elkins – whose conclusions represent a synthesis of historical ideas – became the target of a critical backlash from scholars interested in revising the recorded history of American slavery, many of whom were African American.¹⁴ From the 1970s forward, these historians reread the same primary texts that Phillips, Stampp, and Elkins analyzed, but included the slave narratives that their predecessors had disregarded. Their goal was to remove “the haze of romance” from these historical analyses in order to present the “truth” about slavery and the

¹³ Elkins, 82.

¹⁴ The concepts of slaves’ dependency, lack of identity, and docility were the subjects of dispute among historians like John Blassingame (*The Slave Community*), John Hope Franklin (*From Slavery to Freedom*), and Willie Lee Rose (*Documentary History of Slavery in North America*).

enslaved.¹⁵ Their success was palpable. In the 1980s, Elkins “moved from an emphasis on damaged Sambo to a call for a model balancing servility and creativity,” shifting the focus of slave researchers from rewriting and revising history to resurrecting the texts of ignored and forgotten slave authors.¹⁶

As part of the process of revising gaps in history, Willie Lee Rose presented her essay, “Childhood in Bondage,” opening the subject of slave children to historians and outlining the nascent argument that there is a continuum between childhood behaviors and adult defiance. Still, few subjects under the topic of American slavery have been so overlooked as children. Though John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* (1972) and Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (1976) both dealt with slaves’ family lives, and briefly addressed the topic of slave children, no comprehensive response to Rose’s challenge had been offered by 1976. In fact, it was not until 1990 that the historian Anthony S. Parent, Jr., and psychologist Susan Brown Wallace published research on childhood identity and sexuality in slavery. While each of these treatments chipped away at the mysteries of childhood in slavery, none effectively investigated the continuum of childhood behaviors into adulthood. Wilma King’s 1995 monograph, *Stolen Childhood*, falls short of the mark, and Elizabeth Rabe’s *Slave Children of Texas* (2004), though comprehensive, also fails to make the correlation between childhood defiance and adult rebellion.

¹⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll; the World the Slaves Made* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1974), xiv. Genovese used the phrase “the haze of romance” to explain the origin of Phillips’s racist representation of American slaves.

¹⁶ This quote is taken from William H. Freehling’s preface to Willie Lee Rose’s *Slavery and Freedom*. Willie Lee Rose, *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. William H. Freehling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xi .

For the purposes of her essay, Rose “authenticated” thirty-three narratives and utilized them as the basis of her nascent argument that there is a link between independent or insubordinate slave youth and strong mother figures.¹⁷ Twenty of the thirty-three narrators in this small sample were fugitives from slavery. The majority of them had mothers who occupied special positions in the plantation hierarchy: for example, they were seamstresses, cooks, and nurses. Using this same sample, Rose foreshadowed the work of Gutman and Blassingame in her respective observance of the influence of fathers on the slave family and of the variety of the slaves’ experiences. Twenty-nine of Rose’s authentic narrators recalled their fathers.

Though published in the embryonic stages, her findings are important for two reasons. More than sixty percent of her narrators, discontented with their enslavement, were crafty enough to escape bondage. This is a direct rebuttal to Elkins, who believed that adult bondsmen and bondswomen were rendered docile and childlike under the harsh conditions of the institution. Secondly, Rose foreshadowed Gutman’s work in her conclusion that fathers had both presence and influence in the slave family. She boldly stated that the nuclear family was the norm, not the exception, in slave society.

In fact, Rose opened with an anecdote from the South Carolina slave Jacob Stroyer’s youth that exemplifies the influential father figure within a two-parent household. When he was learning to ride horses as commanded by his owner, Colonel Singleton, young Jacob Stroyer fell victim to recurrent physical abuse at the hands of the trainer. Naturally, he complained to his parents who, up to that point, were the only

¹⁷ In the footnotes to “Childhood in Bondage,” William H. Freehling, editor of *Slavery and Freedom*, states that Rose left no documentation concerning the authenticated narratives nor the process of authentication. *Ibid.*, 206.

authority figures to discipline him. William, his father, responded to his complaints by ordering Jacob to behave himself: “Go back to your work and be a good boy, for I cannot do anything for you.”¹⁸ Rose highlights the wealth of information that is available in this childhood memory. First, the enslaved child’s movement from private to public sphere is clearly noted. Moreover, the father’s dominant position in the family hierarchy is apparent when Stroyer’s mother, Chloe, suggests confronting Colonel Singleton and Stroyer’s father insists, instead, that they pray for freedom.

Rose suggests that early historians discounted the slave father’s influence as a result of Eurocentric, patriarchal views that do not recognize a father in any form but a dominant one. Because slave children’s bondage depended on the mother’s status, they tended to have closer relationships with that parent. Still, fathers maintained a presence in their lives. In fact, Rose argues, “In 1865 freedmen all over the South were seeking former wives, husbands, children, and parents.”¹⁹ This argument refutes contemporary research, most notably the Moynihan Report, which indicated that slavery was the root cause of instability in the Black family during the twentieth century. Though Gutman receives credit for rebutting the controversial report, Rose’s essay foreshadows many of his conclusions.

Gutman, like Rose, belongs to the generation of historians who countermanded the assertions of the historians Elkins and Stamp. Gutman’s work, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, takes an almost militant stance in favor of the adaptive capacities of the Black slave. He compares the slaves’ experience to that of lower-class European

¹⁸ See Rose, 37. As quoted from Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South* (Salem, MA: Newcomb & Gauss, 1898): 17-21.

¹⁹ Rose, 42.

immigrants, thereby downplaying slavery's more injurious psychological and cultural oppression. The primary objective of his research was to disprove the theory that the developing trend of fatherless households in the Black community dated back to slavery, and that the instances when slave children were abandoned did not result from a lack of responsibility on the parts of the parents. The slave institution was set up in such a way that the nuclear family was rather difficult to sustain, but extended family ties flourished.

For instance, children who were orphaned due to the sale, death, or escape of one or both parents were adopted by the community. Unrelated slaves willingly became surrogate family members in the face of such tragedies. Under less tragic circumstances, older slaves who were responsible for caring for the children while their parents were in the field were called "Aunt" and "Uncle." Gutman argues that this practice dates back to African tradition, as evidenced by the use of these terms on the slave ships in the Middle Passage.²⁰ These terms helped cement a "fictive" or "quasi-kin" relationship amongst slaves on the plantation. Gutman quotes the orphan Allen Allensworth's biographer to support his point:

Aunt Phyllis showed him tender sympathy and remarked to aunt Betty that it was a pity "'ter-tek' dat po' child fum his sick mamma and brung him on dis place whah he won't meet nobody but a pas'le o low-down, good-for-nuthin' strangers." This remark attached the boy to aunt Phyllis and he loved her ever afterward. He loved her too, because she had the same name as his mother.²¹

Given names and surnames also highlighted the importance of nuclear and extended family ties. Freedmen's Bureau records recorded slave surnames that differed from the

²⁰ Gutman, 222.

²¹ Ibid., 222.

names of their final owners. It was also quite common for slave children to receive the first names of their fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and deceased family members.²²

Though Gutman's thorough research and engaging prose make this book a classic, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* leaves much to be desired. Gutman's ambitious attempt to exemplify the staying power of Black culture and the resilience of Black people underestimates the impact of the slaveholders' culture on bondsmen and women, thereby creating a second romantic distortion of the slaves' society. Also, Gutman holds that slave women who, prior to marriage, engaged in sexual intercourse that resulted in pregnancy, did not lose social status in slave communities. He supports his argument with the narratives of ex-slaves Isaiah Jeffries and Ned Cobb, and the scholarship of authors T. J. Woofter (*Black Yeomanry: Life on the St. Helena's Island*, 1930)²³ and Charles S. Johnson (*Shadow of the Plantation*, 1934).²⁴ Yet, Gutman does not give evidence from women themselves that these social stigmas were non-existent.

The Parent-Wallace research team analyzed the 1929 and 1930 Fisk University interviews of former slaves to examine childhood perceptions of sexual identity in slave societies. The subjects of their interviews were twenty years old and younger at the close of the Civil War, making their narratives wellsprings of information for historians studying slave childhood. The authors focused on the records of Ophelia Settle Egypt, a Black researcher for Fisk University, whose interviews were more revealing presumably because the Black interviewees did not have to adhere to contemporary deference rituals that clouded Black-White interaction. In response to the inevitable question of the

²² Ibid., 188.

²³ Thomas Jackson Woofter, *Black Yeomanry: Life on the St. Helena's Island* (New York: Octagon Books, 1930), 77, 205-207.

²⁴ Charles Spurgeon Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), 47-50, 66-71, and 810-81.

reliability of their interviewees' memories, the authors analyzed only the details that were repeated by multiple interviewees.

The unique aspect of the Parent-Wallace study is that it purports to deal exclusively with the psychology of slave children, while other researchers had been concerned, primarily, with their physical health. The authors' goals are to frame slave children's perceptions and knowledge of sexual functions, their positions in the slave community's social hierarchy, their opportunities for identity development, and the impact of violence on their sexual identities. Their interviews overwhelmingly reveal children's ignorance of the mechanism of sex and pregnancy, as well as an advanced understanding of forced sexual "liaisons" between White men and Black women.²⁵ What is more, they observe the sometimes harsh, sometimes favored treatment of mulatto children by slave owners.

Echoing the recollections of Frederick Douglass, Parent and Wallace found that the defining moment of sexual awareness for a slave was inextricably linked to the child's clothing.²⁶ Boys and girls dressed identically in long shirts until they were able to join trash gangs or otherwise contribute to the plantation workforce, and they became embarrassed when growth spurts precluded modesty. To avoid such embarrassment, children who might have put off the taxing plantation labor often chose to go to work in the field. Though ill-fitting attire was visibly obvious and a bit more disturbing on young

²⁵ Parent and Wallace, 48.

²⁶ "The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked might be seen at all seasons of the year." From Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845): 10.

boys who were not allotted underwear, it was the girls in this sample who mentioned feelings of immodesty most frequently.

According to Gutman's findings, most slave girls bore illegitimate children at very young ages.²⁷ He also suggests that such conditions were so common as to warrant no apology or embarrassment. However, the Parent-Wallace article indicates otherwise. Egypt's sources observed that it was not uncommon for pregnant, unmarried slave girls to be shunned by their female counterparts: "When I was a girl, if you walked with a girl who had had a baby we would be cut to pieces. We wouldn't be allowed to speak to her."

Despite this disparity between the Gutman and Parent-Wallace models of slave children's sexuality, the psycho-historic team relies quite heavily on Gutman's conclusions. They adopt his bicultural approach to understanding the education of slave youth, in which the "developing slave culture shaped the interior fabric of the developing slave communities [which] also served to socialize the slave child."²⁸ To be clear, what Gutman, Parent, and Wallace refer to as a bicultural approach is really a protracted examination of the slave child's socialization both by the slave family and the slave owners. Also, Parent and Wallace argue that acts of violence committed by slaveholders against children and their relatives operated as "stumbling block[s] toward the development of healthy sexuality and integrated personality."²⁹ This aligns with Gutman's theory that sexual punishment was a form of ritualized cruelty that was an accepted aspect of White slaveholders' sexual mores.³⁰

²⁷ Gutman, 60-61.

²⁸ Ibid., 261-262.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Gutman, 395-396.

Wilma King, author of *Stolen Childhood*, was also influenced by Gutman, though she is not as meticulous as Parent and Wallace in defining her variables.³¹ She does, however, outline her goals quite well in her introduction. One of her purposes is to “extricate enslaved children and youth from the amorphous mass of bond servants.”³² King ferreted through newspapers, court and plantation records, diaries, WPA interviews, census returns, and slave narratives in order to foreground slave children and further her argument that their abbreviated childhoods fostered an early maturity and a pseudo-sense of adulthood in them. She makes an analogy between the Dutch Holocaust victim Anne Frank and slave children to support what I describe to be her “premature maturity” hypothesis.

King compares the North Carolina ex-slave Harriet Jacobs to Anne Frank: “The deprivation that Jacobs suffered during the self-imposed exile may be compared to conditions of war when freedom lovers, such as the family of Anne Frank, sequester themselves to avoid death.”³³ Yet, such a comparison is inaccurate, since Jacobs was an adult with two children when she opted to live in her grandmother’s attic for seven years. Also, Jacobs’s circumstance, unlike Frank’s, was not a matter of life or death. A more effective use of Jacobs’s narrative would have been to note the maturity of her children, Louisa and Joseph, in keeping their mother’s whereabouts a secret.³⁴ In his final meeting with his mother prior to her departure for the North, Jacobs’s son admitted to having known the location of her hiding place for some time. Jacobs, in fact, recalled a certain uneasiness he exhibited any time children played on the side of the house where she was

³¹ See bibliography in Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 232, 241.

³² *Ibid.*, xvii.

³³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁴ Note that in the actual text, Jacobs uses the pseudonyms Ellen and Benny for her children.

hidden and he heard her cough. Her explicit testimony as to the maturity of her young son follows: “Such prudence may seem extraordinary in a boy of twelve years, but slaves, being surrounded by mysteries, deceptions, and dangers, early learn to be suspicious and watchful, and prematurely cautious and cunning.”³⁵ There are multiple examples in Jacobs’s narrative like this one that exemplify King’s suggestions and analyses of the maturity of slave youth and their early socialization into adulthood.

Quoting ex-slaves Jacob Stroyer and Tryphena Fox, King holds that parents taught their children to be extremely courteous to Whites for fear that the slave master or mistress would punish them harshly. This was true in many cases; however, she runs the risk of presenting slave children and their parents as monolithic entities by omitting the possibility that slave children deferred to their own parents when necessary instead of their white owners. For example, In the second chapter of her narrative (“The New Master and Mistress”), Jacobs describes her brother, John, as “a spirited boy” influenced by his father, a skillful mechanic and business man, who “had more of the feelings of a freeman than is common among slaves.”³⁶ She describes a situation in which John’s father and his mistress both call the young boy at the same time. After a moment of hesitation, her brother, John, submits to his mistress:

When my father reproved him for it, he said,

“You both called me, and I didn’t know which I ought to go to first.”

“You are my child, replied our father, “and when I call you you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.”³⁷

³⁵ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 473. Note that Jacobs’s brother’s pseudonym in the text is William.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

This excerpt offers an excellent (and certainly not singular) example of a slave parent teaching self respect and loyalty to one's biological family over unconditional deference to an owner. In all fairness, it is plausible that King neglected these passages for fear of overusing the Jacobs narrative; however, according to the index, Douglass is mentioned twenty-three times, with twenty-one quotes, and Stroyer appears twelve times from King's introduction to conclusion.

Poetry, song, and fiction also infuse King's text, to the detriment of her research. The chapter entitled "World of Work," for example, boasts four songs, none of which specifically relate to children; but all are assumed to have been devices used in educating them about plantation etiquette.³⁸ Even more inappropriate is the page-length analysis of the poem "Run Nigger, Run Patroller'll Ketch Yer" in Chapter Five, which ends with the author's remark that "because of their age it is doubtful that [youngsters] grasped its implication or engaged in the perilous sport."³⁹ This statement renders the entire segment useless. While slave spirituals and rhymes certainly have their place in any study of slavery, the burden of proof should not be placed entirely upon them.

King's reference to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to support some of her arguments is an example of the author's weak use of fictional texts. Certainly, fiction can be used in support of historical arguments. *Beloved* could easily be placed in the discourse of slave infanticide data or the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, since the novel is based on the true story of Margaret Garner who, in 1856, murdered her infant daughter and maimed her two sons rather than raise her children under slavery.⁴⁰ Instead, King

³⁸ King, 32, 37, and 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁰ Steven Weisenburger, *The Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

quotes the fictional character Baby Suggs, grandmother of the murdered slave child, Beloved, on the duties of parents to “keep [children] away from what [the parent] know[s] is terrible.”⁴¹ Building on that quote, the author concludes that “parents demanded obedience, respect, and unity from children to achieve that result.”⁴² It is commonly known, perhaps even presumed, that slave parents, like any responsible parental figures, did all they could to protect their children. So, King’s use of the fiction to support a common-sense understanding is weak.

King’s monograph ultimately does not provide any information on slave childhood that was not already commonly known by historians. In fact, much of her text deals with the slave family as a whole, with only tangential discussions of slave youth. By the end of the monograph, King seems only to have proven that there is such a dearth of information on slave children that a historian’s only option is to turn to creative writers such as Toni Morrison to fill the gaps that exist in the research of slave children.

In her review of *Stolen Childhood*, historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz observes that one of King’s fundamental arguments – that slave children survived oppressive conditions because of their parents’ mitigation – is unsupported by any substantive evidence. The gaps that King overlooks in her failure to “spell out the ways youngsters learned to cope with the cruelties of slaveholders and the consequences of growing up enslaved” undoubtedly inspired Schwartz to focus on these issues extensively in her book, *Born in Bondage* (2000).

Schwartz relies heavily on the WPA narratives, planters’ papers, and the H. C. Nixon questionnaire on Alabama slavery to corroborate her assertion that slave children

⁴¹See Jacobs, 69.

⁴²Ibid., 69.

were in a precarious situation by virtue of the fact that they answered to two sets of adults: slave parents and slave owners. Unlike King who argues that slave children were robbed of childhood altogether, Schwartz argues that slave children had strange childhoods as a result of their negotiation between these two sets of authority figures. She contextualizes her argument by thoroughly examining the paternalist movement that was spearheaded by slave owners in response to abolitionist assertions of the severity of the slave system. Schwartz provides an impressive analysis of the difficulties slave parents faced in maintaining control over the education, well-being, and loyalties of their children when slaveholders undermined their authority. She also points out the fact that slave owners benefited from maintaining the family structure on plantations, especially when the slave trade was outlawed and planters had to rely on reproduction to replenish their plantation workforce. This nuanced examination of the complexities of the owner-parent-child relationship is by far the greatest strength of Schwartz's book.

Born in Bondage is divided into chapters that follow the development of slave children from birth to marriage. Schwartz's distinction between the stages of development is refreshing. She marks the watersheds in slave children's lives that moved them from one stage of maturity to the next. Infancy ended with the children being weaned; early childhood closed with children learning to obey and serve; by age five or six children began to learn skills that would garner income; between the ages of eight and twelve children were initiated into the plantation workforce as fledglings; by the time they reached their mid-teens slave children were full hands who were vulnerable to sale and sexual exploitation. The book ends with an abbreviated treatment of courtship and marriage.

Critics of *Born in Bondage* have cited Schwartz's bleeding of the parents and owners perspectives onto the slave children "in ways that makes the children seem not very childlike at all."⁴³ Though she qualifies her extensive focus on the parents because young slave children did not care for themselves, it is, at times disconcerting. In her review of *Stolen Childhood*, Schwartz accuses King of falling short of her goal to extricate slave children from the mass of slaves. Rather, Schwartz asserts, King "locate[s] them within the world of adults."⁴⁴ At times Schwartz herself is guilty of this practice, shifting slave children from the subjects of this ambitious monograph to objects around and for whom slave parents and slaveholders must make accommodations.

Elizabeth Rabe, author of "Slave Children of Texas: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis," explicitly states that her goal is to fill in gaps that King overlooked. Unlike King, Rabe does exactly what she sets out to do and, in fact, exceeds her goal. The author's twelve-page treatment of Texas slave youth is so comprehensive and informative that it eclipses King's monograph. As indicated in the title, the research is qualitative and quantitative, so much of Rabe's findings are based on statistics derived from a database of interview questions and answers.

She examines the FWP interviews of the 304 former Texas slaves in the study who were born between 1850 and 1863. Like Parent and Wallace, she defines childhood experience as any event occurring before the interviewee was fifteen years of age. The average participants in this project were ten years old when slavery ended and, according to Rabe, had strong memories of their childhoods at the time of the interview. Most interviewees were in their seventies and eighties.

⁴³ Stephanie J. Shaw, "Born in Bondage (Book Review)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 109.4 (2001): 423.

⁴⁴ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, "Stolen Childhood (Book Review),"

Texas joined the union in 1846 and hosted a huge migration of southerners and their chattel property between 1846 and 1860. By 1860 approximately forty percent of the four million American slaves were children under twelve. These facts and statistics qualify the relevance of the author's focus. According to Rabe's database, 94 of the 304 narrators moved to Texas with their owners and "60 percent stated that their parents were born outside of Texas."⁴⁵

The author begins her analysis of Texas slave youth with their induction into the workforce, and then proceeds to such topics as leisure, diet, punishment, education, and insubordination. Like Blassingame, Rabe finds repeated patterns of behavior and circumstance, but concludes that the experiences of slave youth in bondage, like those of adults, are multifarious. Gutman's hypothesis on the significance of extended family in the lives of slave youth is clearly apparent in this piece.⁴⁶ The Parent-Wallace position on the effects of abuse on slave children, both witnessed and experienced, has also influenced this article.⁴⁷ Rabe determines that slave youth had difficult lives that were improved drastically by their interaction with family and community members.

I selected the books and articles for this brief historiography, in part, for their insight into the psychological, spiritual, physical, and economic identities of the slave child. They are also the only works available on the subject, which is not to malign their worth. In analyzing these texts, I have found that the greatest problem in slave child research is the issue of locating reliable and substantive primary sources. The ambitious scholar must research a variety of sources in order to produce a clear portrait of enslaved

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Rabe, "Slave Children of Texas: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis," *East Texas Historical Association* 42.2 (2004): 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

children's lives: for instance, slave narratives, diaries, plantation and census records, secular and religious publications, and traveler's notes. A second, but no less daunting obstacle is the historian's presentation of facts about the personalities, fears, and thoughts of children who did not pen their own narratives. Certainly historical scholars open themselves to a lot of criticism when their texts are littered with inferences that rely a bit too much on the scholar's imagination. A comprehensive exploration of slave children is anything but a modest chore. Perhaps the only solution to painting a holistic portrait of slave childhood is to utilize history in literature and encourage the curious symbiosis between the two disciplines. Novelists are able to overcome the obstacles presented by time (as it relates to the age variable) and written documentation to broaden the discursive terrain of slavery's child.

CHAPTER TWO

REWRITING THE SLAVE NARRATIVE: *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS**JANE PITTMAN*

“I did not go to history books for truth. I went to the history books for some facts that I wanted to have, but not truth because history and truth are different.”⁴⁸

After Emancipation the function of slave accounts shifted from abolitionist propaganda to historical recovery and preservation. The Federal Writers Project (FWP) and the Work Projects Administration (WPA) collected hundreds of interviews in the 1920s and 1930s. This body of information later became the primary research source for a generation of scholars in the 1970s, who began to challenge historical stereotypes of Black American slaves. Historians like John W. Blassingame (*The Slave Community*), John Hope Franklin (*From Slavery to Freedom*), Eugene Genovese (*Roll Jordan, Roll*), and Willie Lee Rose (*Documentary History of Slavery in North America*) dismantled and rewrote the racist historical perspectives launched by respected academics like Elkins. But there was a revisionist strain that gained momentum in the literary discipline as well. The Louisiana-born novelist, Ernest Gaines, is one representative example of those writers who gave voice to the countless enslaved African Americans who had not been able to write or dictate their stories. In his *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1973), Gaines reinterpreted the history of American slavery and its aftershock by creatively manipulating time and utilizing narrative voice and symbolism to compose a neo-slave

⁴⁸ William Ferris, “I Heard the Voices ... of My Louisiana People,” *Humanities* 19.4 (July/August 1998): 5.

narrative that privileges two of the most frequently silenced voices in all of American history: the African American female and the African American child.⁴⁹

In 1968, Gaines began writing the story of a 110-year-old Black woman, whose life spanned from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. He intended to have the various characters who attend her funeral recollect the details of Miss Jane Pittman's life. Initially, his book was entitled *A Short Biography of Miss Jane Pittman*, but when Gaines "fell in love with [his] little character," Miss Jane inserted her own voice into the text.⁵⁰ Gaines opens the novel with a note from the fictional editor that he hoped would both prepare readers for her vernacular language and explain how a story told by an illiterate ex-slave could be deemed an *autobiography*: "What I have tried to do here was not to write everything, but in essence everything that was said. I have tried my best to retain Miss Jane's language. Her selection of words; the rhythm of her speech."⁵¹ This introduction, which resembled the ratifications of authenticity and authorship that opened eighteenth- and nineteenth- century slave narratives, lead Gaines's audience to believe that *Miss Jane Pittman* was a work of non-fiction rather than a novel.⁵²

While the confusion as to the verisimilitude of Miss Jane's story speaks to Gaines's talent as a creative writer, it also underscores some skepticism about the statements and conclusions of canonical slave narrators, and seeks to redress silences and

⁴⁹ As my focus is on the representation of slave children, my analysis of Gaines's novel is primarily confined to the introduction and first chapter. Miss Jane is eleven or twelve years old in Book I; Book II begins ten or twelve years later. While Books II through IV offer much information about the subject of slavery and the plight of women, they fall outside of the scope of my research. I do briefly mention an episode in Book III during my discussion of memory and truth.

⁵⁰ Ernest Gaines, "Miss Jane and I," *Callaloo* 24.2 (Spring 2001): 618.

⁵¹ Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), vii. Hereafter I will refer to the novel in my notes as *MJP*.

⁵² "Since the publication of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* . . . I've read several reviews in which critics have called Miss Jane a real person . . . *Newsweek* asked me to send the editors . . . a picture of Miss Jane Pittman to be used with a review of the novel." Ernest Gaines, "Miss Jane and I," *Callaloo*, 24.2: 608.

subtleties in such early work. Miss Jane states explicitly what her real-life predecessors could only imply. Though she spent most of her life in captivity as a house slave, she does not claim to have had an idyllic childhood: “They brought me to the house to see after the children because I didn’t have nobody to stay with. But they used to beat me all the time for nothing.”⁵³ This passage is very different from the more popular first chapters of canonical narratives like that of Frederick Douglass. At the time that *Miss Jane Pittman* was published, very few women’s book-length narratives had been recovered. In 1968, one hundred years after its original publication, Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, was reprinted. Although Keckley’s narrative is an important part of the African American literary canon, it focuses extensively on her life as a free woman and seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln. In 1973 Walter Teller resurrected Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). According to Jean Fagan Yellin, the author of *Harriet Jacobs: a Life* (2004) “Teller was right that [Harriet Jacobs] wrote the book--but what he was basing this on, no one knows. His publisher would only give him a few hundred [words] for his introd[uction].”⁵⁴ So, Jacobs’s narrative continued to be discounted by scholars until 1987 when Yellin edited the text. Also, the second edition of Mary Prince’s *History of Mary Prince* was published in 1975. Both reprintings of Jacobs’s and Prince’s narratives occurred after Gaines published *Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971.

Frederick Douglass’s book remained the representative example of the slave narrative through the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, it is one of the few book-length narratives that early historians of slavery agreed was worthy of incorporation into their scholarship.

⁵³ *Miss Jane*, 28.

⁵⁴ Jean Fagan Yellin, Re: 1973 Edition of *Incidents*, Email to Jessie Dunbar, 4 Jan. 2006.

Douglass's narrative corresponds so well with the established formula of slave testimonies that I deem it the most appropriate to measure against Gaines's neo-slave narrative.

Douglass opens with the admission that he spent the first seven years of his life "as full of sweet content as the most favored and petted white children . . . freed from all restraint."⁵⁵ In the same chapter he offers details that contradict this statement: he never knew his mother, who was sold away when he was an infant; his master never permitted him to inquire about his age – a fact that vexed him greatly; and, by all reasonable accounts, the man who owned him and sold his mother was also his father. It is plausible that Douglass employed some rhetorical strategy in revealing the details of his life in such seeming contradiction. To admit that he was pleased with such meager conditions suggests that even his awful circumstance was enviable within the broader context of slavery. Douglass fashions a conventional childhood out of his early life, though childhood in slavery precluded such an experience. Even the most pampered young house slave faced threats of separation from family, abuse, and lack of freedom. To be sure, it is the institution of slavery that is on display in Douglass's narrative; his actual life is secondary.

Miss Jane does not employ such tactics. She is not concerned with abolition, nor burdened with the pressure to represent an entire race the way that Douglass was. As she relays her folksy, non-linear anecdotes, Miss Jane is not even mindful of the educational

⁵⁵ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 40. I have chosen to use this later publication of Douglass's narrative instead of the 1845 version since the later version contains more information about the author's childhood.

goals of the unnamed White editor who transcribes her story.⁵⁶ The literary critic, Marcia Gaudet observes: “In the literary tradition of Twain, Faulkner, and Welty, Gaines is able to capture the illusion of the spoken voice on the printed page.”⁵⁷ Gaines allows his protagonist to fumble through her memory for the minute details of the stories she tells, and he uses repetition to dramatize events. Miss Jane begins her narrative, “It was a day something like right now, dry, hot, and dusty dusty. It might ‘a’ been July, I’m not too sure, but it was July or August.”⁵⁸ The intimacy that is central in Gaines’s use of personal narrative to tell the story of Miss Jane is part of what separates his fiction from the slave narrative. Miss Jane’s audience learns more about her *character* and *life experience* in the first three chapters of the novel than in Douglass’s entire narrative.

Writing within the formulaic structure of the slave narrative, Douglass conflates his youthful innocence with blissful ignorance, but Miss Jane is not so inclined. She is exceedingly observant and self-aware. When the novel opens at the end of the Civil War, although she is ten or eleven years old, she recalls interpreting the small gestures and reactions of others during her childhood as though she had undergone adult socialization.⁵⁹ For instance, when the Yankee soldiers pass through her Master’s plantation, Miss Jane is engaged in a conversation with a kind man, Corporal Brown. When she intimates to Corporal Brown that she had better bring his troops some water or

⁵⁶ In the novel’s introduction, Gaines’s editor discusses his frustration with Miss Jane’s style of storytelling: “There were times when I thought the narrative was taking ridiculous directions. Miss Jane would talk about one thing one day and the next day she would talk about something else totally different. If I were bold enough to ask: ‘But what about such and such a thing?’ she would look at me incredulously and say: ‘Well, what about it.’” MJP, vii.

⁵⁷ Marcia Gaudet, “Miss Jane and Personal Experience Narrative: Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,” *Western Folklore* 51.1 (Jan. 1992): 26.

⁵⁸ MJP, 3.

⁵⁹ Social scientists argue that there are two stages of socialization: primary and secondary or adult. The primary stage occurs in early life, during childhood and adolescence, when parental figures teach the child proper social etiquette. Secondary socialization takes place in later life when the individual learns adult behaviors, mores, and taboos. For more information see Jeylan T. Mortimer and Roberta G. Simmons, “Adult Socialization,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 4 (1978): 421-54.

suffer a beating at the hands of her owners, Miss Jane observes that Corporal Brown not only refuses her offer, but delegates the task to Troop Lewis, “a little fellow” who “looked like the kind everybody was always picking on.”⁶⁰ Not only has Miss Jane identified the hierarchy within the group of military men she encounters, she also seems to empathize with Troop Lewis, whose low rank within the social hierarchy of the military has marked him a target.

After the Emancipation Proclamation is handed down, Miss Jane boasts that she is headed for Ohio to meet Corporal Brown. When the adult slaves ask, “You got somebody waiting on you in Ohio?” Jane tells them about the kind Yankee soldier, who stripped her of the slave name, Ticey, and gave her the name of his daughter: Miss Jane Brown. Of the silence that follows, she observes, “Nobody believed Mr. Brown told me [to look him up], but they didn’t say nothing.”⁶¹ No one has to tell her they are incredulous: their silence translates clearly. She also knows that among the Black adults on the plantation, she is reputed to be precocious. Exchanges like these have taught Miss Jane that when she encourages an argument with one of her fellow bondsmen, she will get the last word by virtue of her age because “they didn’t feel they needed to argue with [her].”⁶²

These episodes reveal something more about Miss Jane. Her innocence is characterized by naiveté, not oblivion. The literary critic William L. Andrews observes, “Jane naively assumes that freedom can be obtained in a place called Ohio, which is reachable simply by walking there. Freedom and its fulfillment are thus identified

⁶⁰ *MJP*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

spatially, rather than psychologically and spiritually, in Jane's childlike mind."⁶³ While I agree with Andrews's contention that Miss Jane's oversimplification of the voyage to Ohio is naïve (she believes she can make the trek from Louisiana to Ohio in one week), I disagree with his argument that she has no deep psychological understanding of freedom and seeks to distance herself spatially from the place of her enslavement so that she might be free. For example, before Emancipation, Miss Jane refuses to answer to Ticey, the name that Corporal Brown had termed her "slave name." When her Mistress demands, "You little wench, didn't you hear me calling you," Jane replies, "You called me Ticey. My name ain't Ticey no more, it's *Miss Jane Brown*."⁶⁴ For her impudence, she is beaten until her Mistress is too exhausted to raise the whip. Still, each time her owners ask her name, she says, "Jane Brown." Miss Jane has already rid herself of the metaphorical shackles imposed by her slave name, Ticey. By asserting the independence to take on a new name, and forcing acknowledgment of her liberated mindset on her oppressors, Miss Jane embraces psychological freedom and awaits the physical freedom that follows.

It is not surprising that when her ex-Master finishes reading the Emancipation Proclamation aloud, Miss Jane simply asks for the direction north. When an elder ex-slave, Unc Isom, warns her of the dangers of traveling north with patrollers on the prowl, she replies, "They can't beat me no more ... Them papers say I'm free like everybody else."⁶⁵ While this statement is reflective of Miss Jane's naiveté, it also reveals a strong-willed and defiant nature, a disposition that reflects her continued freedom of thought and psychological independence. The Proclamation only gave Miss Jane possession of her

⁶³ William L. Andrews, "We Ain't Going Back There": The Idea of Progress in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Black American Literature Forum* 11.4 (Winter 1977): 146.

⁶⁴ *MJP*, 9. My emphasis.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

physical person: she already was “her own person” by demonstrating independence, a sense of equality with the White people who owned her, and a determination to assert herself individually in slavery, even beyond the normal limits of the institution.

If she is not pursuing liberty, then what is Miss Jane’s purpose in Ohio? At the very least, she wants to construct an identity apart from slavery. She aspires to recover the childhood that she never had. Miss Jane travels to Ohio to find Corporal Brown, the first person since her mother to acknowledge her not only as a human being but also as a child.⁶⁶ Corporal Brown sees her when others do not “see little old black me”; he even bestows the name of his own daughter upon Jane to replace her slave name, Ticey. I would argue that Miss Jane hopes to become an official “honorary” member of the Brown family when she arrives in Ohio. She is seeking family, and perhaps a more traditional childhood -- not merely physical distance from slavery and thus a superficial freedom. To Miss Jane, liberty means belonging not to a plantation workforce, but to family – a unit of people who will love and protect her.

That Miss Jane desires to be treated as a child within the security of a loving and protective family is the strongest indication of her advanced self-awareness, which I have termed premature maturity, and Gaines fleshes out her character by detailing the circumstances that lead to her abbreviated childhood. The first three sub-headings in Book I disclose that by the time she is ten or eleven years old (she is not certain of her actual date of birth), Miss Jane has lost her mother, who was beaten to death by the plantation overseer; she has been physically abused; and one of her duties is to look after

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

“Young Mistress children,” presumably at night.⁶⁷ A child herself, Miss Jane can not manage to stay awake, and is beaten by her Master and Mistress for it.

A rather disturbing consequence of Miss Jane’s abbreviated innocence is her stoicism in the face of tragic events. Immediately following the Proclamation, Miss Jane is punched in the mouth by the slave driver⁶⁸; and she is nearly raped by a “slow-wit,” one of the slaves in the northward-bound group which she has joined.⁶⁹ The worst of her misfortunes occurs when the young protagonist witnesses the massacre of the entire traveling group except Ned, a little boy who has been separated from his mother before the attack:

... [O]ne of the patrollers slid off the mule, right cross his tail, and cracked the slow-wit in the head. I could hear his head crack like you hear dry wood break ... I kept one hand on my bundle and one on the side of Ned’s face, holding him down ... but all my pressing, he never made a sound. Small as he was, he knowed death was only a few feet away.⁷⁰

When the patrollers depart, Ned and Miss Jane survey the area and find that everyone, including Ned’s mother and infant sister, has been killed. After viewing the first body, she “turn[s] to Ned, but he [is] standing there just as calm as could be.”⁷¹ The eleven-year-old protagonist has the foresight to tell Ned, who is several years younger than she, to stay back when she spots his mother’s corpse. What follows is a haunting passage about Miss Jane’s exposure to the grotesque violence of slavery:

Then I saw Big Laura. She was laying on the ground with her baby still clutched in her arms ... Even before I knelt down I saw that her and the baby was both dead ... I took the baby out her arms ... I knowed I couldn’t bury Big Laura – I didn’t have a thing to dig with – but maybe I

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 21-22.

⁷¹ Ibid., 22.

could bury her child. But when I looked back at Big Laura and saw how empty her arms was, I just laid the little baby right back down. I didn't cry, I couldn't cry. *I had seen so much beating and suffering; I had heard about so much cruelty in those 'leven or twelve years of my life I hardly knowed how to cry.*⁷²

Miss Jane's inability to separate the child from her mother's arms underscores her own desire to belong to a family unit. Even in confronting death, she preserves the sanctity of the parent-child bond. Gaines may also have meant the dead infant girl to emphasize the mutual exclusivity of being a slave child: in other words, to be a slave necessitates a maturity and savviness that cuts short childhood or, at the very least, redefines it as something more than a period of oblivion and innocence. Also significant is the function of the dead child as the symbolic end of Miss Jane's innocence. Her maturation process has undoubtedly been accelerated by both her tangential and direct contact with the discourse and deeds of slavery. Even real-life slave youth who boasted pampered childhoods were not, by any means, shielded from the severity of slavery and the promise of abuse. They observed exhaustion, rape, hunger, and beatings as part of their daily lives and feared those incidents in ways that their White counterparts did not.⁷³

The information on slavery that Miss Jane has omitted from the early part of her autobiography indicates the accelerated maturation of slave children. Like the canonical ex-slave narrators Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, she refrains from relaying some of the precise details of her encounters under slavery.⁷⁴ According to these narrators, some of the abuses that bondsmen and women survived were just too appalling for mass consumption or too painful to recollect in

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23. Italicized sentence is my emphasis.

⁷³ Frederick Douglass, for example, witnessed the flogging of his Aunt Hester and described it as "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery." Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Signet, 1945), 6.

⁷⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1791); Mary Prince, *History of Mary Prince* (1831); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

detail. In terming them unspeakable, they permit the audience to imagine events much more severe than those that have been described. As a result, the omissions take on mysterious and macabre meanings.

Although, Miss Jane has related some of the details of her early childhood, it is apparent that she has omitted much of what she has seen and endured. It is not likely that floggings and the loss of a parent could have prepared her for witnessing a massacre and attempting to bury an infant. There very well may have been additional trauma that we readers are expected to infer. Her failure to mention these details, however, is not a mere rhetorical strategy that Gaines uses to add realism to his portrait of slave childhoods. What his audience might consider unspeakable is merely commonplace to Miss Jane. It is very likely that Gaines omits details in order to demonstrate that the reality of slavery is beyond the scope of severity that readers could imagine.

In revising both the slave narrative and the pervasive image of slave women and children, Gaines has undertaken an arduous task: to be true to the history of slave testimony, while bearing in mind the function of the novel during the Black Arts Movement.⁷⁵ Still, he was able to inform his novel with a creativity that was not permitted to slave narrators during the period in which they wrote. On the most basic level, ex-slave testimonies were factual recordings rather than “creative and actively shape[d]” life stories.⁷⁶ Any semblance of artistic license risked interpretation as lies.

Obligations to sponsors, whose goal as abolitionists was to uncover the harsh realities of

⁷⁵ In an article published in 1968, the influential scholar and author Larry Neal defined the Black Arts Movement as one that was “radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community It envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.” Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review*, 12.4 (Summer, 1968): 28.

⁷⁶ James Olney, “I Was Born,” *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 149.

enslavement, and fellow bondsmen and bondswomen, who may not have had the comparatively privileged life that many narrators boasted, took precedence over any of the typical motives for writing one's life story. For example, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* opens with a heading that lists his reasons for undertaking the project: to satisfy his descendants' curiosity, to offer an example to others, to provide himself the pleasure of reliving events in the telling, and to satisfy his own vanity.⁷⁷ Any or all of these have been traditional motives for the production of for life writing.

According to the renowned scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., nearly "half of the Afro-American literary tradition was created when its authors and their black readers were either slaves or former slaves."⁷⁸ For a number of reasons, this is a peculiar beginning for to the African American literary tradition. Slave narratives served a political end insofar as abolition was concerned, but for Black Americans, they were also the vehicles through which the race could be recognized as members of the human community. The testimonials of ex-slaves received ringing endorsements from reviewers, and enjoyed such a healthy readership that "pro-slavery confederate romances" were published as rebuttals.⁷⁹

I have found numerous differences between traditional slave testimonies and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. In his essay, "I Was Born," the literary critic James Olney observed that the typical opening sentence of a slave's narrative begins, "I was born..." then specifies a place, but not a date, of birth."⁸⁰ The absence of this customary

⁷⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (London, 1793), 1.

⁷⁸ Introduction, *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1985), xv.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁸⁰ James Olney, "I Was Born," *The Slave's Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 153.

introductory phrase in Gaines's novel serves an important purpose. Classified as subhuman by law, slave narrators typically began their testimonies in this way in order to assert their humanity. However, retelling her life story in the 1960s, Miss Jane Pittman is not so confined by the principles and conventions that governed the antebellum slave narratives. While the focus of slave authors was on the brutality of the institution that enslaved them, her story goes beyond slavery into a unique Black experience that encompasses slavery, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement. It is a story that only she can relay. This fact obviates the conventional opening.

Still, as a post-Emancipation narrator, Miss Jane is expected to adhere to certain standards, such as a linear concept of time. Her fictional editor is a historian, and therefore a proponent of a chronological or linear expression of time. However, as highlighted in the introduction, she is not. The editor frequently complains that the narrative is taking “ridiculous directions” since Miss Jane skips around from one subject and time period to the next.⁸¹ She and her caretaker, Mary, argue against Newtonian time and in favor of Miss Jane’s unfolding her story in the order she sees fit. When the fictional editor dares to ask Miss Jane about episodes she failed to conclude in previous discussions, Mary snaps, “Well, you don’t tie up all the loose ends all the time. And if you got to change her way of telling it, you tell it yourself ... Take what she say and be satisfied.”⁸²

The implication of this statement is that human memory is not chronological. While the course of human events can be *organized* by tic marks on a timeline, they are not always recalled in that manner. Ultimately, the editor yields to Miss Jane’s

⁸¹ *MJP*, vii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, vii.

“inclusion of many asides”⁸³ and digressions. The great importance of Miss Jane’s victory is not only that she, an uneducated ex-slave, challenges a professor and editor, but also that she is challenging the very foundation upon which historical scholarship relies: Newtonian time.

In the fifth chapter of her book, *Ernest Gaines*, Valerie Babb turns her attention to Miss Jane and highlights an example of her digression from recalling her personal encounters to commenting on broader African American experience:

As she reviews the nature of education on her plantation, Jane digresses momentarily to tell the story of the Creole family, the LeFabres. By placing a family’s experience, views, and values in the middle of a general history of black education on a postbellum plantation, she gracefully includes the supplementary component, the color division within Creole society that gives her story a distinct Louisiana flavor.⁸⁴

It is significant that when she recalls life on the plantation, Miss Jane does not narrowly specify this account as her own with the standard “I was born” introduction. The omission of the “I was born” section highlights the fact that she is a creative amalgamation of African Americans from slavery to freedom constructed by a contemporary author.

Even as Miss Jane stares incredulously at the editor who dares criticize the manner in which she recounts her story, she conjures the spirit of an ex-slave like Mary Prince, who similarly proclaimed herself the representative vehicle through which free people could know the truth about enslavement:

I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England know it too, that they may break our chains and set us free.⁸⁵

⁸³ Valerie Melissa Babb, *Ernest Gaines*, (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 80.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁵ Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, ed. Moira Ferguson (New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 74.

Prince, the first Black female author to publish a book-length narrative, is well aware of the fact that she speaks to a White audience who can only know slavery tangentially. She is the conduit through which the slave experience is conveyed. “In telling [her] own sorrows, [Prince] cannot pass by those of ...fellow slaves—for when [she] thinks[s] of [her] own griefs [she] remembers theirs.”⁸⁶ Miss Jane, however, is the mouthpiece for an even broader spectrum of African Americans: slaves and mulattoes, cowboys and activists. As such, the community’s story *is* Miss Jane’s story. The anonymity of the fictional editor also furthers Gaines’s agendas: to reclaim the power of story-telling in the Black community and to validate the oral culture in comparison to written cultures.

Because of the one-hundred-year difference between the fictional editor’s interview with Miss Jane and the abolition of slavery, it is necessary for Gaines to address the issue of “truth.” Slave narratives were presented as “plain, unvarnished” tales devoid of hyperbole.⁸⁷ Gaines too bears the responsibility of establishing his novel’s protagonist as a credible character and a reliable source of information. Yet, unlike the typical ex-slave narrator, Gaines allows Miss Jane’s memory to be called into question. During the first two weeks of the interview, as Miss Jane’s editor states, the transfer of information is smooth and predictable. However, in the third week

everything slowed up to an almost complete halt. Miss Jane began to forget everything...The only thing that saved me was that there were people at the house every day that ... were glad to help in every way that they could. Miss Jane was constantly turning to one of them for the answer.⁸⁸

The relationship between Miss Jane and her associates is so symbiotic that they need one another to complete the narrative. Her physical reaction to questions that she either

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁷ Olney, “I Was Born,” 152.

⁸⁸ *MJP*, vi.

chooses not to answer herself or whose answers she does not recall, exemplifies this bond. She turns to “one of them” for the answer. It seems not to matter which person is present. Any one of them can relay the details as effectively as she does because this story belongs to all of them.

On another level, and perhaps one that Gaines did not conscientiously consider, the mere mention of memory in his novel distinguishes it from the slave narrative. James Olney puts it best in this lengthy, but important excerpt:

What we find Augustine doing in Book X of the *Confessions* – offering up a disquisition on memory that makes both memory itself and the narrative that it surrounds fully symbolic – would be inconceivable in a slave narrative. Of course, ex-slaves do exercise memory in their narratives, but they never talk about it as Augustine does, as Rousseau does, as Wordsworth does, as Thoreau does, as Henry James does, as a hundred other autobiographers (not to say novelists like Proust) do. Ex-slaves *cannot* talk about it because of the premises according to which they write, one of those premises being that there is nothing doubtful or mysterious about memory: on the contrary, it is assumed to be a clear, unflinching record of events sharp and distinct that need only be transformed into descriptive language to become the sequential narrative of a life in slavery. In the same way, the ex-slave writing his narrative cannot afford to put the present in conjunction with the past...for fear that in doing so he will appear, from the present, to be reshaping and so distorting and falsifying the past.⁸⁹

Gaines, however, embraces the conjunction between the present and the past and dares to cast doubt on Miss Jane’s memory, confident that this will not deter from the larger project of discussing slavery’s traumas or triumphs. Miss Jane is more than one hundred years old when she recollects her youth and early adulthood. From the very beginning of the novel, Gaines’s fictional editor intimates his discovery that not everything on the tape was absolutely correct when he interviews some of the people who knew Miss Jane. The disparities may have been the result of perspective coloring the memory of events. More

⁸⁹ James Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1998), 151.

likely, however, is the possibility that Miss Jane's remembrance of episodes from her past is clouded by her age. Gaines calls Miss Jane's memory into question to create realism in his character and novel.

In Book III, Miss Jane fumbles through her memory to place the exact year of an event. She can only do so by recalling watershed moments whose dates stand out to her. For instance, she remembers when Timmy, the illegitimate mulatto child of Robert Samson, the owner of the property on which Miss Jane eventually gains employment, left the plantation to pursue a better life. As she tries to remember the precise year he left, Miss Jane says, "Timmy left here when? Let me think now, let me think. 1925 or '26- because he was gone before the high water, and the high water was in '27."⁹⁰ With this small detail, Gaines has altered the very idea of what it means to tell the "truth" about slavery. By presenting both his Miss Jane's strengths and fallibility, he writes about slavery in a more complex and plausible manner than many of the early slave narrators did.

In this reprisal of American slavery and the period that followed Emancipation, Gaines suggests that the "truth" about the peculiar institution and its far-reaching effects can only be known when the voices that he amplifies through Miss Jane are heard. What he has done with *Miss Jane Pittman* is to appropriate the voice and style of the slave narrative, manipulate time, acknowledge memory, and, by extension, infuse this once propagandistic device with creativity. He establishes the connection between autobiography and slave narratives by giving Miss Jane complete autonomy in the process of remembering.

⁹⁰ *MJP*, 147.

Like the slave narrators to whom he responds, Gaines also contends with certain political constraints. Just as slave authors expressed a duty to free their fellow captives, so too did African American writers of the 1960s and 1970s assume a responsibility to counter stereotypes about Blacks with positive and varied representations. Certainly, with the “premature maturity” of Miss Jane, Gaines contests Elkins’s assertion that bondsmen and bondswomen were childlike and docile. As a child herself, she is defiant and strong-willed. Though occasionally naïve, she is not infantile and proves extremely capable of taking care of herself and her adoptive son, Ned, under trying circumstances. Though she becomes a mother at age ten or eleven, Miss Jane manages to raise her son Ned to become a powerful young man who speaks out against injustice and dies for the cause of civil rights. Slavery has accelerated, not arrested, the maturation process for Miss Jane. As a composite of various slave narrators, Miss Jane responds directly to pervasive stereotypes throughout history and literature about the weakness and naiveté of slave children and women.

CHAPTER THREE
BOTH WOMAN AND CHILD: INNOCENCE AND MATURITY IN *BELOVED*

“When I hear someone say, ‘Truth is stranger than fiction,’ I think that old chestnut is truer than we know, because it doesn’t say that truth is truer than fiction . . . but the important thing is that [truth is] random – and fiction is not random.”⁹¹

During the early 1970s, Toni Morrison was employed as an editor for Random House. While working on *The Black Book* (1974), “a genuine black history book – one that simply recollected black life as lived,” she came across an interview with a Kentucky fugitive slave woman, Margaret Garner, who was imprisoned in 1851 for fleeing Robert Garner’s plantation.⁹² When Mr. Garner arrived in Ohio, where his fugitive slaves sought refuge, Margaret Garner was struck with a homicidal impulse to protect her children. Though she was never tried for the crime, Garner murdered her third child, Mary, and intimated that she meant to kill all four of her children and then take her own life to save them from bondage. This article, originally printed in *The American Baptist*, planted the seed for what came to be known as *Beloved* (1987). Morrison, a mother herself, read the article and reasoned that no person, short of the slain child, had the right to judge Garner, “and from there *Beloved* inserted herself into the text.”⁹³ Without conducting any further investigation into the Garner story, its trial, legend, or mythology, Morrison invented the unforgettable slave character after whom the novel was named.

Beloved is the tale of a murdered slave child whose angry spirit returns in physical form to confront Sethe, her mother and killer. Its labyrinthine, neo-slave narrative

⁹¹ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” *Inventing the Truth*, ed. William Zinsser. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 113.

⁹² Toni Morrison, “Behind the Making of the *Black Book*,” *Black World* (February, 1974): 86-90.

⁹³ In her 1988 interview with Marsha Darling, Toni Morrison stated “I got to a point when in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn’t, and nobody else that knew [Sethe] could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed.” Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 248.

structure, coupled with the subject matter and poetic language, has provided critics with boundless opportunities for analysis. Scholars of literature, history, and psychology have theorized on practically every element of the novel, from the jazz aesthetic in Morrison's writing to the stages of grief Sethe experienced. Though Morrison plucked slave children from the margins in her telling of the emotional anguish suffered by Sethe's two daughters, Denver and Beloved, many literary critics continue to shift them from subject to object. Articles on such themes as breastfeeding and grief only recognize the two prominent slave child characters as recipients of action rather than actors themselves. It is necessary to examine Sethe's character in order to conduct a thorough investigation into the psyches of her children, but to overlook or downplay her two offspring – especially her female children – is to neglect the chief vehicles through which Morrison illustrates the overarching theme of the novel: the necessity of facing a painful past in order to overcome it.

The literary scholar Chris Peterson offers a prime example of this type of oversight in his article, "Beloved's Claim."⁹⁴ The title is a bit of a misnomer insofar as Peterson is more concerned with "the violent claims of possession and ownership" exhibited in Sethe's infanticidal act than with Beloved.⁹⁵ It is his argument that critics of the novel have endorsed Sethe's violence by contextualizing it within the framework of ideal maternal love. He later poses a compelling question, to which he fails to offer any substantive response: "What of Beloved's claim, the claim of a ghost who reaches across time and space, trespassing the borders that separate the living and the dead?"⁹⁶ To explore this query would be to unveil a major element of this novel's uniqueness.

⁹⁴ Chris Peterson, "Beloved's Claim," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Fall 2006) 52.3: 548-569.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 548.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 549.

Morrison, like no author before her, is “looking to find and expose a truth about the *interior* life of people who didn’t write it.”⁹⁷ In *Beloved*, Morrison gives voice to the nameless, faceless, and voiceless victims who died on the Middle Passage and on plantations. But, as she points out, “fiction is not random,” and so Morrison carefully chose the central figures of her novel. The book is dominated by Sethe, Beloved, and Denver, lending voice and depth to both women and children in slavery.

Like *Miss Jane Pittman*, *Beloved* falls under the category of the neo-slave narrative. The literary critic Susan Willis points out that the typical outline of the slave narrative is “to trace the story of the individual’s life in slavery, escape, and the journey to freedom,” and *Beloved* qualifies on two counts.⁹⁸ Over the course of the novel, Morrison elucidates the details of Sethe’s harrowing journey from enslavement on the Sweet Home Kentucky plantation to freedom in Ohio, at the home of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. But Morrison reveals that

“the process must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the psychological trauma created by their brutality. The physical escapes ... create the patterns for their psychological escapes: archetypal journeys of courage, descents into almost certain death, and rebirths into beauty and freedom.”⁹⁹

Like Gaines, Morrison is as concerned with detailing the psychological journey toward freedom as she is with the physical. In shifting the focus of enslavement from the physical burdens to the psychological ones, Morrison creates a platform on which slave children can be more readily considered as participants in the slave system. Though children did not have the same labor demands or threats of violence as bondsmen and

⁹⁷ Morrison, *Site of Memory*, 113.

⁹⁸ Susan Willis, “Black Women Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective,” *Making a Difference; Feminist Literary Criticism*, Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, eds. (New York: Methuen, 1985), 220.

⁹⁹ Susan Bowers, “*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse,” *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, David Middleton, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

women, they experienced a number of psychological traumas, including the fear of being separated from family, and watching helplessly as loved ones were beaten.

Morrison is truly writing to resurrect the forgotten and perhaps to inspire a new renaissance that does not seek the approval of the dominant class.¹⁰⁰ In this way she has taken Gaines's neo-narrative to another dimension. Miss Jane is naïve, vulnerable, precocious, but always amazingly strong and righteous in spite of all her shortcomings. Morrison's child characters respond to their anger, fear, loneliness, and abandonment; their vulnerability is the pretext of the novel, not the subtext. She introduces emotions that American society does not generally identify with its construction of childhood because they are not innocent feelings. Gaines manages to replace childish oblivion with youthful naiveté, but he does not seek to redefine the concept of innocence the way that Morrison does with *Beloved* and *Denver*. Sethe's daughters are absolute victims, and they both harbor resentment. In her depiction of slave children, Morrison presents a both/andness that permits her characters to be both furious and innocent; victims and avengers; childish and adult-like. She exposes all of these emotions and just as effectively vilifies the institution of enslavement while preserving the guiltlessness of its victims.

This concept of both/andness could not be explored thoroughly by slave narrators, whose stories had already been "scorned as 'biased' 'inflammatory' and 'improbable' ... it was extremely important, as you can imagine, for the writers of these narratives to appear as objective as possible – not to offend the reader by being too *angry* or by

¹⁰⁰ Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 233.

"... I'm not sure that the other Renaissance, the Harlem one, was really ours. I think in some ways it was but in some ways it was somebody else's interest in it that made it exist. This one is interesting because it may have started out as a fashionable thing to do because of the Civil Rights Movement and so on, but it ended up as ... we snatched it! So maybe this is really *our* Renaissance for the moment, rather than entertaining or being interesting to the Other. "

showing too much outrage.”¹⁰¹ Ex-slaves had to kowtow to popular taste by skimming over some of the more gory details of enslavement. They were

“discouraged ... from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience ... one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day ...’But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.’”¹⁰²

It is where these veils have been dropped that Morrison wishes to fill gaps by fleshing out the slaves’ characters and experiences, and by foregrounding the severest violations. The plot upon which *Beloved* hinges, a mother who murders her child by slicing her throat with a handsaw in order to shield the child from the cruelty of enslavement, goes beyond the realm of what would have been feasible for an ex-slave narrator to discuss. It would have been deemed too scatological even in the 1960s and 1970s when Gaines was writing his reprisal of American slavery.

Morrison herself was not certain that *Beloved* would be as well received as her previous work because of the harshness of the subject matter: “it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia.”¹⁰³ In presenting slavery as a subject that its victims do not *want* to remember, Morrison answers the assertions that ex-slave testimonies are fallible based on the narrators’ temporal distances from the stories they recollected. *Beloved*’s central characters relate to the past in such a way as to suggest that there could not be enough distance from the horrible remembrances ex-slaves endured. Their present lives are

¹⁰¹ Morrison, “Site of Memory,” 106.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰³ Morrison, *Conversations*, 257.

bound up in keeping the past at bay. So, the act of forgetting is attempted with purpose, and fails because of the lack of *psychological* distance from the events.

It is this exercise of “rememory” to which I would like to turn my attention, as it is an integral element in *Beloved*’s expression of rage, and Denver’s journey toward psychological freedom.¹⁰⁴ In her conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison discusses the process of fleshing out the character *Beloved*: “I just imagined her remembering what happened to her, being someplace else and returning, knowing what happened to her.” Memory and knowledge are closely tied in Morrison’s remark. It does not matter if the memory is flawed by interpretation, or if the knowledge gleaned from the recollection is uninformed by wisdom. *Beloved* *remembers* Sethe slitting her throat, so she *knows* she was abandoned. *Beloved* has no room for forgiveness or healing in that interpretation. So she is left with a childish rage and a paranormal power with which to express her anger.

Because *Beloved* embodies the forgotten memory of slavery, she has total recall of the murder, the Middle Passage, and the journey from the spiritual to the physical realm. Death and the Middle Passage were cold, tight, lonely places. Toward the end of the novel, Morrison allows Sethe, Denver, and *Beloved* to narrate their own stream-of-consciousness chapters so as to provide insight into their interior lives in their own words. *Beloved*’s descriptions of the Middle Passage are pictorial, and at moments resemble a description of an after-life:

how can I say things that are pictures I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in it is hard to make yourself die forever you sleep short and then return his teeth are pretty white points if I had the teeth of the man who died on my

¹⁰⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 36.

face I would bit the circle around her neck bite it away I know she does not like it it is the crouching that is now always now¹⁰⁵

All of these memories fuel her feelings of abandonment, and inspire her to have supernatural tantrums and “make [unrealistic] demands.”¹⁰⁶ When she is required to share her mother’s attention, the spirit Beloved becomes irritated with Sethe’s “willingness to pay attention to other things,”¹⁰⁷ and she slams the family dog into the wall “hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye.”¹⁰⁸ In another episode she projects a red light by the doorway of 124 that “soaks” its inhabitants with such grief that they want to cry when they walk through it.¹⁰⁹ Though it is tempting to argue that Beloved is spiteful *despite* her innocence, it is more reasonable to argue that her vengeful behavior stems from her two-year-old interpretation of the circumstances surrounding her death and a hyperbolized infantile reaction to abandonment .

When Beloved takes the form of a nineteen-year-old woman and identifies herself to Sethe, she begins by insisting that her mother spend hours by her side watching autumn leaves. Eventually, she begins to take “the best of everything – first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered”¹¹⁰ Beloved is unmoved by Sethe’s pleas. Though she can identify with the pain of the collared woman on the slave ship, Beloved can not interpret the pain that Sethe feels for having murdered her. It can be inferred from her *knowledge* that the collared woman did

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 210-11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 240.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 241.

not like having the circle of iron around her neck, that she *remembers* a similar experience. Although Beloved has various identities in the novel that allow her a certain level of omniscience, she does not know Sethe's pain. Beloved has no association with feelings of guilt because she is wholly innocent. She can not remember, know, or understand that Sethe is so remorseful that she must cope by staving off the past as best she can.

There are two key reasons that Beloved can not truly be blamed for her malevolent actions. First, Beloved is a "motherless child," who has had close to no adult supervision or guidance. She has never learned to temper her desire with responsibility or reason. Beloved is "unbridled id, self-centered and not easily denied."¹¹¹ The single lesson that Sethe is able to teach Beloved before killing her is that murder is an acceptable expression of love. Second, Beloved's mental and emotional development is arrested when she is slain, and Sethe (and on a larger scale the entire ex-slave community) has called her forth in this "devil-child" form.¹¹² Besides the reincarnated spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, Beloved is the physical manifestation of her mother's guilt. Though she physically develops into "a fully dressed woman," Sethe has seen to it that Beloved will never develop emotionally or psychologically beyond age two.¹¹³

One might argue that Beloved never really appears young in the text. "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water," indeed, but "she had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands."¹¹⁴ Sethe is overcome with the need to void her bladder when Beloved first appears. The urine persists in the manner of breaking

¹¹¹ Trudier Harris, "Beloved: Woman, Thy Name is Demon," *Toni Morrison's Beloved, A Casebook*, William L. Andrews and Nellie McKay, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.

¹¹² Morrison, *Beloved*, 261.

¹¹³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 50.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

water as the novel's namesake is reborn. Also, Beloved "can hardly walk without holding on to something"¹¹⁵ and "sugar could be counted on to please her."¹¹⁶ Finally, she begins shedding what are presumably her baby teeth.¹¹⁷

It is apparent that Morrison means to conflate the identity of the Beloved ghost with that of the home at 124 Bluestone Road in order to lay the framework for the character that she becomes when she crosses over into the physical realm. "124 was spiteful," Morrison asserts in the novel's opening paragraph, "Full of baby venom."¹¹⁸ The first sign of this conflation is the house's number: children one, two, and four survived Sethe's attack; number three, Beloved, is conspicuously absent. Even Denver "approach[es] the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud)."¹¹⁹ Sethe's personification of the house is tied to her guilt insofar as she refuses to leave 124 because it would be like abandoning Beloved a second time. She is not concerned that she alienates her boy children – creating in them the need for hasty and secret departures. Sethe has a much stronger maternal instinct as far as her daughters are concerned. When Howard and Buglar leave 124, Sethe hardly bats an eye:

124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all. There was a time when she scanned the fields every morning and every evening for the boys. When she stood at the open window Cloud shadow on the road, an old woman, a wandering goat untethered and gnawing bramble – each one looked at first like Howard – no, Buglar. Little by little she stopped and their thirteen-year-old faces faded completely into their baby ones, which came to her only in

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

sleep. When her dreams roamed outside 124, anywhere they wished, she saw them sometimes in beautiful trees, their little legs barely visible in the leaves.¹²⁰

But when Beloved returns in physical form, “Sethe’s greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning – that Beloved might leave.”¹²¹ This strong feeling seems to fulfill Sethe so well that she appears oblivious to the losses of her husband, who disappears before they can escape together; her mother-in-law, who lay in bed for months until her heart collapses; and her sons who leave in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye. Sethe believes she deserves to endure Beloved’s tantrums as punishment. It is her way of coping with the guilt of her crime. If we accept that interpretation, Beloved is read as the sickness and the treatment of its symptoms.

Sethe’s dilemma is that Beloved can not fulfill her selfish agenda by remaining in spirit form. She must transform into the physical in order to receive her reparations for abandonment. Amy Denver, the white woman who saves Sethe’s life and helps get the boat to Ohio forewarns, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”¹²² The statement is a double entendre; hurt must be read both as an adjective and a verb. In order to truly injure Sethe the way that she has been wounded, Beloved needs a voice, which can only be attained when she takes on a physical form. With a voice, Beloved can question Sethe about the past she has tried so desperately to avoid, and force her to recall the pain that she felt and inflicted:

Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to – that she had to get them out, away That her plan was always that

¹²⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹²¹ Ibid., 251.

¹²² Ibid., 35.

they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved wasn't interested.¹²³

Even when she watches her mother fade away while Beloved grows larger, and despite her sister's greed and cruelty, Denver maintains Beloved's innocence. She watches her mother closely for "any sign that Beloved was in danger."¹²⁴ Earlier in the text, after Denver has discovered Beloved's identity, she goes as far as to ask "You see Jesus? Baby Suggs?"¹²⁵ The reference to Jesus is enough to presume that Denver believes her sister to be a heavenly being. Baby Suggs, before she had lain down to die, had become the community preacher, and accepted the title "holy." The subtext of Denver's query is that Beloved can be without sin and yet vengeful as a result of sins committed against her. It is not until Denver realizes that, more than her sister, Beloved is "past errors taking over the present," that she is able to see Beloved's agency in her unforgiving acts.¹²⁶ So, Beloved's plan to have Sethe accommodate her for the suffering she endured in death backfires, and catalyzes Denver's psychological freedom journey, which in turn ignites Sethe's healing process.

Although Denver never suffered any of the atrocities of slavery to which her mother or her sister were subject, she too is affected by the emotional and psychological ramifications of being a slave child. Like her mother, Denver "had her own set of questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested [her]."¹²⁷ Denver's psychological journey toward liberation begins with "all the anger, love, and fear she didn't know what to do with" and ends with her forgiveness of Sethe's heinous

¹²³ Ibid, 241.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 256.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 119.

act, and a burgeoning understanding of the forces that drove her mother to do what she did.

Denver's fear of the past, what it means to have a mother who can unapologetically murder her children in the name of love, stifles certain segments of her emotional development and accelerates others. She develops a type of agoraphobia that will not permit her to leave 124 Bluestone Road, thereby arresting the process of social development. This fear, however, does not permit Denver to maintain the innocence that is associated with childhood. Rather, her phobia is the result of her unseasonable loss of innocence.

At the age of seven, Denver learns from a classmate that her mother murdered her older sister, and that she, a newborn, was imprisoned with Sethe. When she manages the courage to ask her mother if there is any truth to what she has heard, Denver refuses to hear the response. It is at that moment that she decides to turn her back on the past. For the next two years, Denver "walked in a silence too solid for penetration but which gave her eyes a power even she found hard to believe."¹²⁸ All in the same moment, she lost her hearing and her innocence.

Morrison's description of Denver's powerful eyes is reminiscent of Sethe's: "[she] was thirteen when she came to Sweet Home and already iron-eyed."¹²⁹ Although little is known about Sethe's life on the plantation on which she was raised before coming to Sweet Home, it is evident that the losses she suffered were great. Morrison draws parallels between Denver's and Sethe's maturation processes, which make Denver no less a slave child for having been raised in the free state of Ohio.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 10.

With regard to their personal journeys toward psychological freedom, Denver and Sethe are very different. Denver is the first member of the 124 household to actually face and reconcile her own past, *as well as* her mother's history. After two years of hysterical deafness, Denver's hearing returns when the ghost, Beloved, noisily climbs the steps in the house. Up to that point, Sethe had been blaming her sons, Howard and Buglar, for the strange noises and goings-on in 124. Baby Suggs assumes it is the family dog, Here Boy. Denver knows immediately who, or rather what, is making the noise, and she does not permit the family to remain oblivious: "She was trying to get upstairs...Didn't you hear her crawling?"¹³⁰

Denver's discernment is remarkable for a nine-year-old. Even after she acknowledges, on behalf of the whole family, Beloved's identity as the ghost of Sethe's slain child (an act which made the presence spiteful), she remains a step ahead of everyone else in the household. When she peeks in the window of a lighted room in 124, she sees her mother praying, "which was not unusual. What was unusual ... was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist."¹³¹ So, Beloved appears in "physical" form to Denver before the rest of the family. While Beloved "is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead ... she is also another kind of dead ... a survivor from the true factual slave ship."¹³² But Beloved carries a third symbolic meaning. She is also the "disremembered" history of enslavement. Though Beloved functions as all three "presences" in the novel, it is the latter that makes Denver's insightful recognition of her sister exceptional. To be clear, if Beloved represents the history of slavery, and Denver is the first to acknowledge, see,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹³¹ Ibid., 29.

¹³² Morrison, *Conversations*, 247.

and identify her, that means that Denver is the first to begin the journey toward freedom and healing.

When *Beloved* first appears at 124 in fleshly form, Sethe is overcome by an uncontrollable urge to void her bladder “and the water she voided was endless... there was no stopping the water breaking from the womb and there was no stopping now.”¹³³ Despite this peculiar physical reaction to *Beloved*, Sethe is not the first to identify the nineteen-year-old woman as her daughter; again, Denver takes the lead. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, one of very few literary critics to foreground the experiences of the Denver and *Beloved* in his research, observes:

Denver is the first to recognize that *Beloved* is the incarnation of the ghost that had haunted 124; and she is also the first who lives through that recognition and develops the understanding necessary for an affirmative return to life. Like everyone else in the novel, she must learn to confront the past in order to face the future.¹³⁴

The moment of recognition comes in the midst of innocent child play. *Beloved* invites her younger sister, to join her in a “little two-step;” she beckons Denver with the very phrase that she and Sethe used to call forth the ghost of *Beloved* so many years ago: “Come on. You may as well just come on.”¹³⁵ Stunned, Denver “grew ice cold as she rose from the bed.”¹³⁶ This moment is pivotal as Denver’s peculiar reaction is to ask questions despite her personal phobia of her family’s past:

“Why you call yourself *Beloved*?”
 “What’s it like over there, where you were before?”
 “Were you cold?”
 “What did you come back for?”¹³⁷

¹³³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 51.

¹³⁴ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Daughters Signifying(?),” *Toni Morrison’s Beloved, A Casebook*, William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

Denver, whose only historical interest – prior to the reincarnation of her dead sister – was in the story of her own birth, now has a vested interest in Beloved’s past. This is another in a series of steps she will take in understanding the hurtful past so she can eventually overcome it.

Understanding the past is not enough, however. Soon after she discovers the identity of Beloved, Denver realizes the threat that she poses to her family, “the danger of the past’s taking over the present.”¹³⁸ When the three women are in the Clearing where Baby Suggs preached on Sundays, Denver looks on as Beloved spiritually throttles her mother. If there is a choice to be made between Sethe or Beloved, Denver is ashamed to admit that she would choose her sister. “Beloved was *hers*,” Denver asserts.¹³⁹ So long as she continued to harbor resentment and fear of Sethe for betraying her understanding of mother’s love, Beloved, and all the painful baggage that comes along with her, would be Denver’s. Denver too would be possessed by Beloved.

Rushdy argues that “what Denver must do is remember” the collective history of her family and all Black people who suffered under enslavement. While I agree that “rememory” is key in Denver’s process of healing, it is the redefinition of her family’s history in terms that Denver can live with that will save her and Sethe. Morrison allots each of the women a chapter toward the end of the novel to work through their fears, desires, and secrets. In Denver’s chapter, it is evident that she is afraid of her mother:

‘It’s all on me now, but [Beloved] can count on me. I thought she was trying to kill her that day in the Clearing. Kill her back. But then she kissed her neck and I have to warn her about that. Don’t love her too much. Don’t. Maybe it’s still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children ... She cut my head off every night. Buglar and Howard told

¹³⁸ Rushdy, “Daughters Signifyin(g),” 48.

¹³⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 104.

me she would and she did. Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger. Not mean or anything, but like I was somebody she found and felt sorry for. Like she didn't want to do it, but she had to and it wasn't going to hurt.¹⁴⁰

But when she realizes not only that her mother is overcome with remorse for the murder, but that Beloved is a threat, Denver must alter her view of the past. Now instead of being a source of strength and reliability for Beloved, Denver chooses to protect, and love, Sethe.

If there remained any question about Denver having been divested of her childhood, Morrison is careful to reiterate this fact at the end of the novel. After Beloved's identity is revealed to Sethe and the mother/daughter relationship between them becomes increasingly parasitic, Denver ventures out on her own, for the first time since she was seven. She returns to the home of her old school teacher, Lady Jones, to request assistance for her family. Though Mrs. Jones has not seen Denver for eleven years, she recognizes her immediately. Through the eyes of Denver's teacher, we see that Morrison's intention is to create ambiguity around Denver's status as woman:

She was older, of course, and dressed like a chippy, but the girl was immediately recognizable to Lady Jones. Everybody's child was in that face: the nickel round eyes, bold yet mistrustful...She must be eighteen or nineteen now, thought Lady Jones, looking at the face young enough to be twelve.¹⁴¹

The image evoked by this passage is one of a young, sheltered girl, dressed like a prostitute. Morrison asserts that "everybody's child" is in Denver's face, implying that most Black children suffer this accelerated maturity. Denver's eyes are "mistrustful." This, too, is a quality that Morrison attaches to African American childhood. This face,

¹⁴⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 206.

¹⁴¹ *Beloved*, 246-7.

with all its baggage, looks young enough to be twelve, but sounds old enough to be grown.

Strangely, it is Denver's adult interaction with Lady Jones, who still sees her as a little, misguided child, which propels her to womanhood. She asks Mrs. Jones if she can work for her in order that she might feed her family. In Lady Jones's reply is the acknowledgment of a childhood lost and an impending adulthood: "'Oh, baby,'" said Mrs. Jones. "Oh baby."¹⁴² It is the first time that Denver is treated gently as a youth, rather than with the harshness that comes with Sethe's thick love. Like Sethe and Paul D., Denver can only begin to heal when she acknowledges her loss. That moment with Lady Jones contains all the childhood she has left.

After she crosses this threshold into womanhood, Denver faces the demons her mother called forth when she murdered Beloved, and comes to something beyond understanding, something more like peace. I will quote this passage at length as it so adequately encapsulates Denver's newfound freedom, understanding, and womanhood:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that. She knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning – that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant – what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life – Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that ... anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all

¹⁴² Ibid., 248.

right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean.¹⁴³

Though she herself has not been sexually violated the way her mother had been, despite the fact that she did not know that part of Sethe's history until an angry Beloved demanded to know it, Denver "remembers" that feeling of loss and transforms it into knowledge that will permit her to view her mother's choices through a different lens. The homicide is not so heinous as Denver might have originally thought. She may not have been able to live with the history of her family that her classmate had regurgitated, but Denver and Sethe reclaim it, and this process functions as a microcosmic representation of the relationship between Black people and the African American literary tradition. "The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance," Morrison asserts, "because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you certainly can debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours."¹⁴⁴ Denver and Sethe reclaimed the rights to tell their story, and rewrote it to reflect their "interior" lives, in order that they might actually coexist with the outside world.

¹⁴³ *Beloved*, 251.

¹⁴⁴ Morrison, *Conversations*, 244-5.

CONCLUSION

Students of history continue to ignore the simple fact that all individuals are born by mothers; that everybody was once a child; that people and peoples begin in their nurseries; and that society consists of individuals in the process of developing from children into parents.¹⁴⁵

The causal relationship between the validation of women's narratives and the research of slave children serves to highlight the link between marginality and historical recovery. In her essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison poses a provocative question concerning the absence of African Americans in American literature: "What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence and what effect has that performance had on the work?"¹⁴⁶ The same question can be posed about slave children in historical texts. The feat performed to erase slave children from the history texts for decades was to devalue their testimonies (I am referring to the WPA narratives) and the narratives of their mothers. It was not until women, especially literary and historical scholars, became involved in historical recovery that slave women, like Margaret Garner, and their children were rescued from marginal obscurity. So, it is painfully appropriate that Morrison chose to characterize the forgotten memory of slavery with an "abandoned" slave girl. *Beloved* is a calculated rebuttal to the many erasures that necessitated Morrison's revisionist novel.

¹⁴⁵ Erik H. Erikson, "Ego Development and Historical Change: Identity and the Life Cycle," *Psychological Issues* 1 (1959): 18.

¹⁴⁶ Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (Winter 1989): 12.

Even with all of the revisionist strategizing that occurred between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, there were still places where the reconstructed slave persona remained flat. It had become increasingly apparent that there are areas that are beyond the reach of historians, who, for the sake of credibility, can not take much creative license in interpreting the extant records of fugitive slaves. According to Morrison, “It’s not the historians’ job to do that ...”¹⁴⁷ Creative writers, like Gaines and Morrison, however, possess the “special though difficult freedom,” that permits them to imagine the interior lives of their slave child characters, and round out academic explorations of these personalities with emotional excavations.¹⁴⁸ Though slave children have been elusive research subjects for various reasons, Morrison asserts, “If they can live it, I can write about it.”¹⁴⁹ That attitude, the refusal to accept the idea that any aspect of history is beyond art, has been the final and possibly the most important step in this particular revision process because “the *consequences* of practically everything we do, art alone can stand up to.”¹⁵⁰

I plan to conduct a protracted exploration of slave childhood in a doctoral dissertation that will examine the depictions of slave youth in nineteenth century narratives. Canonical authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Mary Prince, and Harriet Jacobs are exemplified as intellectually advanced youth whose maturation processes were expedited through witnessing and experiencing physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Their testimonies serve, not only as abolitionist rhetoric, but as a response to the commonly accepted notion that slaves, stuck in the early stages of

¹⁴⁷ Morrison, *Conversations*, 244.

¹⁴⁸ Ralph Ellison, “The Uses of History in Fiction,” *Southern Literary Journal* 1.2 (Spring 1969): 57.

¹⁴⁹ Morrison, *Conversations*, 244.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

development, were perpetually childish, docile, and in need of the guidance provided by the patriarchal system of enslavement.

As slave testimony provided ammunition for abolitionist poets (Frances Harper), novelists (William Wells Brown), and orators, I would also like to mine archived publications like Maria Weston Chapman's *Liberty Bell*, and explore the manner in which the abolitionist/apologist discourse informed the foci of these creative and persuasive pieces, while marking the evolution of the abolitionist movement from a mere exposition of the horrors of slavery to the acknowledgment of the humanity of slaves. Propaganda photos like those of the predominantly White "Rebecca" and Fannie Lawrence as well as poetry and speeches dealing with the murder of slave children by slave parents highlight the manner in which children were objectified to achieve this purpose.

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