

THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
THE AFRICAN  
AMERICAN SLAVE  
NARRATIVE

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2007

2007

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## Neo-slave narratives

## The critical context

The institution of slavery in the United States was a site of unimaginable physical, emotional, and spiritual cruelty, justified by greed and racism, and sanctioned by religion, philosophy, and the law. Written into the nation's founding documents, its very existence betrayed the contradictions at the heart of national identity and consciousness. It is thus little wonder that it has compelled a rich, challenging, and demanding body of cultural products, from sorrow songs and work-songs, to the antebellum narratives written by individuals who had emerged from a system that denied them literacy, to an extraordinary genre of retrospective literature about slavery that exploded in the last decades of the twentieth century and shows no signs of abating.

According to conventional wisdom, the term "neo-slave narratives" originated with Bernard W. Bell's 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell described "neo-slave narratives" as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,"<sup>1</sup> although over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell's initial description could have anticipated. This genre, which includes some of the most compelling fiction produced in the last fifty years, has evolved to include texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterwards, at any time from the era of Reconstruction until the present. They approach the institution of slavery from a myriad perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes. Their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities. Further, they provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities)

for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. The twentieth- and twenty-first century writers of these works of literature possess a measure of creative and rhetorical freedom unavailable to the freed and fugitive slaves who wrote narratives during the antebellum period. Moreover, the contemporary authors write from a perspective informed and enriched by the study of slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race and power relations in America and throughout the world during the twentieth century, and the rise of psychoanalysis and other theoretical frameworks. They are therefore free to use the imagination to explore the unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants.

The diversity of the neo-slave narratives has inspired a rich array of critical studies. Works such as Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) and *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return: African American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (2001), Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), and Arlene R. Keizer's *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), as well as innumerable articles, have advanced a range of theories that expand Bell's initial definition, situate the genre in contemporary cultural politics, and analyze the ideological work these texts perform.

For instance, in *Neo-Slave Narratives* Rushdy defines the genre as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative."<sup>2</sup> He reads the works on which he focuses in light of the social, political, and cultural changes that emerged out of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Rushdy's later book, *Remembering Generations*, concentrates on a subcategory in the genre, a body of texts he calls "palimpsest narratives," works in which a late twentieth-century African American is haunted by a family secret that involves an antebellum ancestor. Here, Rushdy is particularly concerned with how texts such as Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) "all represent the processes of transmitting and resolving family secrets as a way of showing the perduring effects of slavery on contemporary subjects."<sup>3</sup>

Preferring the term "liberatory narratives" to "neo-slave narratives," Angelyn Mitchell explores how *Kindred*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa*

Rose (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), and Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995) problematize the meaning of freedom. As she puts it: "the liberatory narrative is self-*CONSCIOUS thematically of its antecedent text, the slave narrative; is centered on its enslaved protagonist's life as a free citizen; and is focused on the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self.*"<sup>4</sup>

Caroline Rody and Arlene Keizer expand our perspective on the genre by exploring how writers across the African diaspora engage with the history of slavery. In *The Daughter's Return*, Rody considers the disparate ways in which African American women writers (such as Octavia Butler, Lucille Clifton, Julie Dash, Jewelle Gomez, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Phyllis Alesia Perry, and Alice Walker) and Caribbean women authors (such as Jamaica Kincaid, Jean Rhys, Michelle Cliff, and Maryse Conde) map revisions of narratives of New World slavery onto feminist allegories of "a daughter's recuperation of a severed mother-daughter relationship."<sup>5</sup> Arlene Keizer argues that works such as *Beloved*, Charles Johnson's *Oxberiding Tale* (1982), *Middle Passage* (1990), and "The Education of Mingo" (1977), Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Derek Walcott's play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1972), and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991), which she calls "contemporary narratives of slavery," theorize about "the nature and formation of black subjects, under the slave system and in the present, by utilizing slave characters and the condition of slavery as focal points."<sup>6</sup>

#### Early texts

Most accounts of the neo-slave narrative as a genre begin with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), a magisterial historical novel which draws on Walker's meticulous research to extend the reach of her grandmother's stories of her life in slavery and freedom. While it is true that neo-slave narratives began to appear in earnest after the mid-1970s, no discussion of the genre is complete without some mention of *Black Thunder* by Arna Bontemps (1936). Although it was published during the Depression rather than during the late twentieth century, *Black Thunder* is a compelling novel that anticipates much of the cultural work that later texts in the genre perform.

First, like *Chaneysville, Beloved*, Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1993), Louise Meriwether's *Fragments of the Ark* (1994), *The Price of a Child*, and so many others, *Black Thunder* uses a real historical event, in this instance the Gabriel Prosser Revolt of 1800, as the point of departure from which to explore a host of complex issues: the meaning of freedom; the ideological

connections between the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the spirit of rebellion among slaves in the United States; the diversity of black male experiences and identities within the institution of slavery; and the complex interaction of Anglo-American and African-derived traditions in the production of black culture, particularly religious practices.<sup>7</sup> Second, as both Hazel V. Carby and Eric J. Sundquist note, Bontemps (who would later edit *Great Slave Narratives*, published in 1969) anticipated the writers and social historians of the 1960s and afterwards by drawing on the slaves' own testimony in order to describe their inner lives. Third, as later writers in this tradition create a subtle conversation between stories based in slavery and contemporary cultural politics, Bontemps likewise turns to the past to illuminate the persistence of injustice and resistance throughout history. In the words with which he begins and ends the foreword to the 1968 edition of the novel, he asserts that time "is not a river. Time is a pendulum" (pp. xxix, xxix). It is thus little wonder that he would be drawn to the story of a slave insurrection at a time when his attention was captivated both by Mahatma Gandhi and the struggle for independence in India, and by the trials of the "Scottsboro Boys."<sup>8</sup>

*Black Thunder* focuses on the period immediately preceding and following Gabriel Prosser's unsuccessful attempt to emancipate more than a thousand slaves in Virginia. The narrative moves through a variety of perspectives, including those of Gabriel (the fierce and charismatic leader), Pharaoh (a cowardly and insecure field hand of mixed racial origins), Old Ben (a retainer torn between his desire for freedom and his devotion to his master), Mingo (a bold freedman and saddle-maker), Criddle (the brave but dim-witted stable boy), Melody (a freed woman who shares her sexual favors with white men), Juba (the passionate and fearless slave woman who is Gabriel's lover), and two white men who sympathize with the slaves' desire for freedom, M. Creuzot, the French printer, and Alexander Biddenhurst, the lawyer from Philadelphia. Perhaps most strikingly, through the use of interior monologue, the novel also incorporates the collective consciousness of the slave community.<sup>9</sup> In scenes that depict burial rituals, clandestine practices of communication, and discussions of root working, this unattributed group voice conveys the ways in which blacks maintained community within the context of the brutal and dehumanizing conditions of enslavement.

In this novel, versions of the rhetorical question "Don't you want to be free?" recur in conversations between and among black people. The answer to this question proves to be anything but self-evident; through the array of characters, the novel problematizes the very notion of freedom. Mingo and Melody may be free in name, but they are subject to the whims of whites as long as they live in a slaveholding state.<sup>10</sup> Old Ben is not sure

that he wants to be free if freedom means leaving his comfortable life with Moseley Sheppard, the white man he has served for many years. And for Gabriel, true freedom is more than a solitary escape. He might well have *been able to escape on his own, but his personal freedom is meaningless while others are left behind in slavery.* As he puts it: "A man is got a right to have his freedom in the place where he's born. He is got cause to want all his kind-folks free like hisself" (*Black Thunder*, p. 210). In the process of redefining freedom, the text also prompts readers to think what it means to consider the revolt a failure. Gabriel meets his execution with such courage and fortitude that his death testifies to the triumph of the human capacity to conquer oppression.

The neo-slave narratives published during the latter decades of the twentieth century represent slavery from a variety of perspectives and with a broad range of emphases. Satires like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) use techniques such as humor, hyperbole, and anachronism to underscore the absurdity of the institution itself and of its representations, as well as its links to contemporary practices that commodify black bodies and cultural forms. The subgenre that Rushdy calls "palimpsest narratives" includes works such as *Corregidora*, *Kindred*, and *Chaneysville* in which late twentieth-century characters are haunted by their enslaved ancestors. In *Kindred*, Butler (like Phyllis Alesia Perry in her 1998 novel *Stigmata*) mines the possibilities of the supernatural in order to capture the inextricable ties between the past and the present. Butler's protagonist, Dana, is a young African American woman who lives in California with her white husband, Kevin, in 1976. She finds herself ripped back into antebellum Maryland whenever the life of her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, is in jeopardy. Thus she agonizes over the fact that although she empathizes with the subjection that Hagar (the enslaved black woman who is also her ancestor) endures, her very existence depends upon her ability to keep Rufus alive long enough to rape and impregnate Hagar.

Set in the context of the bicentennial of US independence, *Kindred* underscores the extent to which American national consciousness depends upon the sexual violation of black women. The fact that Dana confronts her own identity as the product of a coercive relationship between Rufus and Hagar highlights the interdependence of constructions of black and white identities. Finally, during the scenes when Kevin accompanies Dana back to Maryland, they confront the history of white supremacy and racial exploitation that underlies the "color-blind" surface of their post-Civil Rights era interracial marriage. For their own safety, Kevin has to "pass" as Dana's master, and he falls into that role all too easily. This experience thus suggests the proximity and connection between slavery and contemporary racial relations.

Many of the works in this genre turn to the story of slavery as a lens through which to examine contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. *Corregidora* considers how the history of an enslaved woman's sexual abuse has become inscribed in the sexuality of her female descendants in the twentieth century. *Dessa Rose* imagines not only the erotic tension of stolen moments of intimacy among slaves, but also the sexual competition and the possibility for collaboration between enslaved black women and free white women in the antebellum South. Works such as *Flight to Canada* and *Oxherding Tale*, like *Black Thunder*, examine how black masculinity is both compromised and asserted within the institution of slavery. David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* considers the weight of this legacy upon a young black man in the twentieth century.

*Chaneysville* was inspired by the story of a group of thirteen slaves, en route to freedom on the Underground Railroad, who chose to die when they realized that they were about to be recaptured in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. The novel focuses on a young black man's search for the meaning of his father's life and death. The protagonist, a Philadelphia-based professor of history named John Washington, does not know that he is after his father's story when he returns home to western Pennsylvania to nurse (and then to bury) his ailing surrogate-father, Old Jack Crawley. Jack's death prompts him to visit his parents' home and study the exhaustive collection of manuscripts and journals that his late father, Moses Washington, left behind. This research helps him to understand that the meaning of his father's suicide is deeply connected to the slaves' decision to die years before. Moreover, as he creates a coherent account out of these disparate materials to share with Judith, the white psychiatrist with whom he is romantically involved, he comes to understand the role of the imagination in the making of historical narrative.

*Chaneysville* features two consummate raconteurs, Old Jack and John. Jack, a mangy shoe-shiner who spent his life in an isolated cabin, was one of Moses' closest friends. He assumed responsibility for instructing John in the ways of the woods after Moses' sudden death, teaching him to drink, hunt, fish, and build a fire. Moreover, he spun for John countless yarns about his own escapades with Moses and their mutual friend, Josh White. John's return home triggers flashbacks of his own childhood and adolescent adventures, and recalls a series of the old man's stories.

John appears to have inherited his talent for recording history from Jack, the storyteller, and from Moses, the keeper of documents, although he has difficulty reconciling his analytic and narrative abilities. In the early sections of the novel, he tends to fall into extended, pedantic stories about sociological phenomena and historical events. Indeed, Judith upbraids him for

hiding his feelings by talking in lectures. But John learns to transform facts imaginatively when he discovers the store of journals and manuscripts on which his father was working at the time of his death. The data Moses had accumulated means nothing to John until he can reconstruct the minds of his father and of the thirteen slaves. When he can explain what motivated the fugitives to give up their lives, he can also understand his father's reason for taking his own.

### *Beloved*

Based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman in Boone County, Kentucky, who killed her own child rather than allow her to be sold, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* remains one of the most celebrated contemporary novels of the slave experience and one of the most highly acclaimed novels of the twentieth century. In writing *Beloved*, Morrison confronted, like other writers of neo-slave narratives, the challenge of recovering the lived experience of enslavement given the paucity of available materials from the slaves' perspective. As she remarks in an interview with Marsha Darling, the process of writing the book required her to supplement historical research with the resources of the imagination; only then could she get at the story of the infanticide of a slave child from the child's perspective:

I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent. I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn't, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed.<sup>11</sup>

Although *Beloved* is based on a real-life incident, Morrison deliberately altered the original account for strategic purposes. Her protagonist left her husband in slavery, escaped to freedom, and remained free with her living children. In contrast, as she remarks to Darling:

Margaret Garner escaped with her husband and two other men and was returned to slavery . . . [Garner] wasn't tried for killing her child. She was tried for a *real* crime, which was running away – although the abolitionists were trying very hard to get her tried for murder because they wanted the Fugitive Slave Law to be unconstitutional. They did not want her tried on those grounds, so they tried to switch it to murder as a kind of success story.

### Neo-slave narratives

They thought that they could make it impossible for Ohio, as a free state, to acknowledge the right of a slave-owner to come get those people . . . But they all went back to Boone County and apparently the man who took them back – the man she was going to kill herself and her children to get away from – he sold her down river, which was as bad as was being separated from each other. But apparently the boat hit a sandbar or something, and she fell or jumped with her daughter, her baby, into the water. It is not clear whether she fell or jumped, but they rescued her and I guess she went on down to New Orleans and I don't know.<sup>12</sup>

Set in Cincinnati in 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War, *Beloved* is nevertheless a novel about slavery. The characters have been so profoundly affected by the experience of slavery that time cannot separate them from its horrors or undo its effects. Indeed, by setting the novel during Reconstruction, Morrison invokes the inescapability of slavery, for the very name assigned to the period calls to mind the havoc and destruction wrought during both the antebellum era and the Civil War years.

A novel as complex as *Beloved* does not lend itself easily to summary. It is a work that explores, among other topics, the workings and the power of memory; to represent the persistence of the past, Morrison eschews linear plot development for a multidirectional narrative into which the past breaks unexpectedly to disrupt the movement forward in time. The novel begins at 124 Bluestone Road, in the household that Sethe, a former slave, shares with her daughter Denver and the ghost of the daughter she killed. Number 124 had once been home also to Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, and Howard and Buglar, Sethe's two sons, but Baby Suggs has died and the two boys have run away from the baby ghost.

The trajectory of the plot begins when Paul D, one of Sethe's friends from the Sweet Home plantation, arrives unannounced at her home. In short order they renew their friendship, become lovers, and decide to live together. Paul D tries to rid the house of the presence of the baby ghost, but his attempt at exorcism only triggers her return in another form, as a ghost made flesh and in the form of a young woman.

Sethe and Paul D are both haunted by memories of slavery that they wish to avoid. Sethe tries to block out the experience of being whipped and having her breast milk stolen by the nephew of Schoolteacher (her master's cruel brother-in-law); of killing her daughter to prevent her from being taken back into slavery; and of exchanging sex for the engraving on that same daughter's tombstone. Paul D wants desperately to forget having seen the physical and psychological destruction of the other black men who worked on the Sweet Home plantation; having been forced to wear a bir, and having endured the hardships of the chain gang.

The former slaves' desire for forgetfulness notwithstanding, the past will not be kept at bay. The slightest sensation triggers memories that overwhelm them. Moreover, the novel turns on the embodiment and appearance of *Beloved*, the daughter Sethe killed in order to prevent her return to slavery. In the intensity of their connections with each other, and in their various encounters and engagements with *Beloved*, the characters explore what it means for them to confront their past suffering and to move beyond that past. Additionally, through the use of the incarnate ghost, the novel considers the place of black bodies in the construction of narratives of slavery.

Early in her life in freedom, Baby Suggs ministers to the black fugitive and former slaves outside Cincinnati. Her message, which transforms the Christian doctrine of self-abnegation and deliverance after death, is meant to heal the broken and suffering bodies of those who endured slavery. As she herself, with legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue broken by slavery, has resolved to use her heart in the service of her vast congregation, she yearns to restore the bodies and spirits of the former slaves through her sermons:

'Here,' [Baby Suggs] said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back . . . So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver -- love it, love it, and the bear and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.<sup>13</sup>

Readers may be inclined to read Baby Suggs's use of the word "heart" metaphorically, to assume that by "heart" she means compassion. But in the context of this litany of broken body parts, one is reminded that the word "heart" points to an organ as well as to an emotional resource. In this context, it becomes more difficult to make the leap from the corporeal referent to the metaphysical; such an erasure of the corporeal would be all too close to the expendability of black bodies under slavery.

The focus on bodies in the novel is clear both in the predominance of scenes of physical suffering and scarred bodies and also in the characters' sensory experience of their past. During their lives as slaves, Sethe, Paul D, and Baby Suggs know psychological and emotional humiliation. For instance, Paul D is shamed by the knowledge that the barnyard rooster possesses more

autonomy than he himself does. Sethe is humiliated by Schoolteacher's efforts to measure and quantify her own and her fellow slaves' racial characteristics. And Sethe and Baby Suggs are acutely sensitive to the power that slavery has over the bonds between kin. Yet despite the recognition of these sorts of philosophical and emotional deprivations, *Beloved* seems especially engaged with the havoc wrought upon black bodies under slavery: the circular scar under Sethe's mother's breast and the bit in her mouth; the bit in Paul D's mouth; Sethe's stolen breast milk and the scars on her back; the roasting body of Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, to name but a few.

Notwithstanding her attempts to forget her enslavement, Sethe's memories come to her through her body; sensory perceptions set flashbacks in motion. When washing stinging chamomile sap off her legs, the scent and the sensation propel her back into the past:

The splash of water; the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not want her to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. (p. 6)

Sethe's body is also linked to the past by virtue of the hieroglyphic nature of the scars on her back. She wears on her body the signs of her most arduous ordeal at the Sweet Home plantation. The story of the brutal handling she endured as a slave – the stealing of her breast milk and the beating that ensued – is encoded in the scars on her back. Their symbolic power is evident in the variety of ways that others attempt to read them. For Baby Suggs, the imprint of Sethe's back on the sheets looks like roses of blood. And Paul D, who cannot read the words of the newspaper story about Sethe's act of infanticide, reads her back as a piece of sculpture: "the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (p. 17). Paul D further reads the suffering on her body with his own:

He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches . . . [He] would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. (pp. 17–18)

Paul D registers in an incessant trembling the humiliation he felt before Brother, the rooster, and the indignity of being forced to wear leg irons and handcuffs. No one knew he was trembling, the narrator tells us, "because it began inside":

A flutter of a kind, in the chest then the shoulder blades. It felt like rippling – gentle at first and then wild. As though the further south they led him the more his blood, frozen like an ice pond for twenty years, began thawing, breaking into pieces that, once melted, had no choice but to swirl and eddy.

(pp. 106–07)

Insofar as the characters feel suffering through their bodies, they are healed through the body as well. Sethe is cured three times by healing hands: first Amy Denver's (the young white woman who helps deliver Denver), then Baby Suggs's, and finally Paul D's. Indeed, one might read *Beloved's* sexual relations with Paul D as a bodily cure. Paul D refuses to speak too fully the pain of his suffering in slavery. This refusal reflects his sense that his secrets are located in what remains of his heart: "in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (pp. 72–73). However, when *Beloved*, ghost made flesh, compels him to have sexual relations with her, she tells him, in language that recalls Baby Suggs's earlier speech, "to touch her on the inside part" (p. 117). The description of this scene suggests that the act of intercourse with *Beloved* restores Paul D to himself and restores his heart to him:

She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again.

(p. 117)

In a number of ways, then, Morrison calls attention to the suffering that bodies endured under slavery. The novel, much like Baby Suggs, seeks to reclaim those bodies and to find a way to tell the story of the slave body in pain.

In her essay "Unspeaking Things Unspoken," Morrison writes that she hoped that from the opening lines of *Beloved* her readers' experience of the novel would approximate the slaves' sense of dislocation.<sup>14</sup> Of course, however evocatively Morrison renders human suffering in *Beloved*, finally the reader experiences only narrative representations of human suffering and pain. To speak what is necessarily, essentially, and inescapably unspoken is not to speak the unspoken; it is rather only to speak a narrative or speakable version of that event.

*Beloved* thus points to a paradox central to any attempt to represent the body in pain: one can never escape narrative. The figure of *Beloved* herself most obviously calls into question the relationship between narrative and the body. As a ghost made flesh, she is literally the story of the past embodied. Sethe and Denver and Paul D therefore encounter not only the story of

her sorrow and theirs; indeed, they engage with its incarnation. *Beloved's* presence allows the generally reticent Sethe to tell stories from her past. Once Sethe realizes that the stranger called *Beloved* and her baby *Beloved* are one, she gives herself over fully to the past, and to *Beloved's* demand for comfort and curing. Indeed, Sethe is so devoted to making things right with *Beloved*, she is almost consumed by her. Without Denver's and her neighbors' and Paul D's interventions pulling her back into the present, she would have been annihilated.

The very name "Beloved" interrogates a number of oppositions. Simultaneously adjective and noun, the word troubles the distinction between the characteristics of a thing and the thing itself. To the extent that the title of the book is an unaccompanied modifier, it calls attention to the absence of the thing being modified. Additionally, the word "beloved" names not only the girl baby returned: in the funeral service the word addresses the mourners of the dead. The word thus names at once that which is past and present, she who is absent, and those who are present.

Finally, the word "beloved" calls attention to the space between written and oral, for until readers know the context in which her name appears, we do not even know how to speak that name: with three syllables or two. In the terms the novel offers, *Beloved* might be understood to exemplify what Sethe calls "rememory," something that is gone yet remains. Recalling both "remember" and "memory," "rememory" is both verb and noun; it names simultaneously the process of remembering and what is being remembered.

The reader confronts the unnarratability, indeed the inadequacy of language, perhaps most powerfully in the passages of interior monologue told from Sethe's, Denver's, and *Beloved's* points of view. After telling Paul D about Sethe's murder of her daughter, Stamp Paid, the man who conveyed the family to freedom, is turned away from 124 Bluestone Road by the "uncipherable language . . . of the black and angry dead" (p. 198). Mixed in with those voices were Sethe's, Denver's, and *Beloved's* thoughts – "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (p. 199). In the four sections that follow, we read the unspeakable and unspoken thoughts of the three women, first separately, then interwoven. Here, from Sethe's perspective, are her memories of killing her daughter, of being beaten, of being abandoned by her mother. Largely addressed to *Beloved*, Sethe's words convey recollections she could never utter to another. Likewise, in her section, Denver expresses her fear of her mother and her yearning to be rescued by her father, anxieties that, for the most part, had previously been suppressed.

*Beloved's* is, however, the most riveting and most obscure of the monologues. For here is represented the preconscious subjectivity of a victim of infanticide. The words that convey the recollections and desires of someone

who is at once in and out of time, alive and dead, are richly allusive. The linguistic units in this section, be they sentences, phrases, or individual words, are separated by spaces, not by marks of punctuation. Only the first-person pronoun and the first letter of each paragraph are capitalized. This arrangement places all the moments of Beloved's sensation and recollection in a continuous and eternal present.

From the grave, Beloved yearns to be reunited with her mother: "her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (p. 210). But in addition to her feelings and desires from the grave, Beloved seems also to have become one, in death, with the black and angry dead who suffered through the Middle Passage: "in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men" (p. 211). In the body of Beloved, then, individual and collective pasts and memories seem to have become united and inseparable.

By representing the inaccessibility of the suffering of former slaves, Morrison reveals the limits of hegemonic, authoritarian systems of knowledge. The novel challenges readers to use their interpretive skills, but finally turns them back upon themselves. By representing the inexpressibility of its subject, the novel asserts and reasserts the subjectivity of the former slaves and the depth of their suffering. *Beloved* reminds us that, our critical acumen and narrative capacities notwithstanding, we can never know what they endured. We can never claim and possess a full understanding of lives lived under slavery. To the extent that *Beloved* returns the slaves to themselves, the novel humbles contemporary readers before the unknown and finally unknowable horrors the slaves endured.

#### Recent interventions

Among recently published narratives of slavery, several merit at least brief mention here. Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), a reimagining of the world of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* from the point of view of a mixed-race woman, and Nancy Rawless's *My Jim* (2005), told from the point of view of Sadie Watson, the wife Jim left behind when he goes off on the raft with Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, suggest how the genre has been used to speak back to conventional practices of representing the lives of the enslaved. While earlier neo-slave narratives address this issue by incorporating white or black writer-figures (*Charysville*, *Beloved*, and *Dessa Rose*, to name but a few), these works confront the politics of representation more directly by invoking the omissions and inclusions of some of the best-known works of American fiction.<sup>15</sup>

With its focus on Mercer Gray, a fugitive slave who lives in a community of freed blacks in Philadelphia, Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* reflects upon the meaning of freedom and of identity for those living under the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Law. Based on a true incident involving a slave named Jane Johnson, Mercer, formerly known as Ginnie, walks away from her master with the help of prominent real-life abolitionists William Still and Passmore Williamson. Although she is able to keep the two children who are traveling with her, the price of her freedom is her third child, the one she was forced to leave behind in Virginia. The novel evokes her experience as a woman forging a sense of herself as an individual, a mother, and a citizen within a multifarious community of free black people and the integrated abolitionist movement. *The Price of a Child* provides a rare window into emergent black identities in the context of fierce legal battles, the vexed politics of the antislavery lecture circuit, and the competitive dynamics of the free black community.

Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003) takes this meditation on the meaning of freedom one step further, offering a nuanced reflection on the epistemological, moral, ethical, legal, economic, and spiritual implications of owning and trafficking in human life. By decoupling the condition of slave ownership from whiteness and the condition of enslavement from blackness, the text offers a multivalent perspective on the construction of race and the elusiveness of freedom for blacks in the United States during the antebellum period. A richly plotted novel filled with fascinating, complicated, morally ambiguous characters, *The Known World* lacks a protagonist toward whom our attention might naturally gravitate.

The novel centers on the world that surrounds Henry and Caldonia Townsend, free black slave owners in antebellum Virginia. Besides an assortment of free and enslaved blacks, Native Americans, and white owners and workers, that world includes Henry's parents, Mildred and Augustus; their former master, William Robbins; Henry and Caldonia's former teacher and close friend, Fern Elston; Moses, Alice, Elias, and Celeste (several of Henry and Caldonia's slaves); and John Skiffingron, the local sheriff, his Northern-born wife, and his treacherous, Southern cousin, Counsel. Through persistent foreshadowing and a riveting yet meandering narrative line, Jones signals both the unpredictable ways in which lives are connected and the inescapable consequences of even the most insignificant actions.

One might assume that in a novel about black slave owners, the villains and the victims would be clear. But one of the great achievements of *The Known World* is Jones's use of this subject to explore the nature of moral ambiguity. Henry, Caldonia, and Fern, the black masters, are smart, generous, and loving individuals who believe that they are more compassionate



than their white counterparts. All of them make moral compromises in order to justify their collusion with the system of slave ownership. When Anderson Frazier, the Canadian journalist, interviews Fern in 1881 for his pamphlet *On "free Negroes who had owned other Negroes,"* he remarks that were he in her position, he would consider slave ownership to be "like owning my own family, the people in my family."<sup>16</sup> The repetitions that erupt in Fern's response convey the extent to which her reliance on "fictions of law and custom" have overridden her sense of morality:

'Well, Mr. Frazier, it is not the same as owning people in your own family. It is not the same at all . . . You must not go away from this day and this place thinking that it is the same, because it is not . . . All of us do only what the law and God tell us we can do. No one of us who believes in the law and God does more than that. Do you, Mr. Frazier? Do you do more than what is allowed by God and the law? . . . We are like in that way. I did not own my family, and you must not tell people that I did. I did not. We did not. We owned . . . We owned slaves. It was what was done, and so that was what we did . . . We, not a single one of us Negroes, would have done what we were not allowed to do.

(pp. 108-09)

Mildred and Augustus are outraged that Henry, the son they worked so hard to free, would purchase slaves to help him build his estate. They believe that they have failed in some fundamental way to teach him that the very condition of slave ownership is a moral contaminant that the owner cannot avoid. This interior monologue, following two brief yet pointed questions, captures the intensity of Mildred's self-reproach:

'Henry, why?' she said. 'Why would you do that?' She went through her memory for the time, for the day, she and her husband told him all about what he should and should not do. No goin out into them woods without Papa or me knowin about it. No stepping foot out this house with them free papers, not even to go to the well or the privy. Say your prayers every night.

'Do what, Mama? What is it?'

Pick the blueberries close to the ground, son. Then the sweetest, I find. If a white man say the trees can talk, can dance, you just say yes right along, that you done seen em do it plenty of times. Don't look them people in the eye. You see a white woman ridin toward you, get way off the road and go stand behind a tree. The uglier the white woman, the farther you go and the broader the tree. But where, in all she taught her son, was it about thou shall own no one, havin been owned once your own self. Don't go back to Egypt after God done took you outa there.

(p. 137)

The final sentence of this passage alludes to the familiar parallel between the enslavement of blacks in the United States and the enslavement of the Jews

in Egypt as recounted in the Old Testament. The sentence also equates the position of the slaveholder with that of the slave, as Mildred and Augustus see it, by purchasing Moses, Henry has compromised his own freedom and returned to the system of enslavement. Like Fern, Henry sees the situation differently; he too retreats behind a fiction of custom, when he says: "Papa, I ain't done nothing I ain't a right to. I ain't done nothing no white man wouldn't do" (p. 138).

Henry and Augustus come to blows over the issue of slave ownership, but the two generations make peace with each other over time. Augustus refuses to stay in Henry and Caldonia's house when he visits them, but he and Mildred are happy to stay in an unoccupied cabin on the property and visit with the other slaves. After she is widowed, Caldonia decides to keep, rather than free, the slaves she inherited from Henry. She begins an intimate relationship with Moses, and then asks herself if miscegenation laws apply to sex between a free black woman and her slave: "His words caused her to wonder if Virginia had a law forbidding such things between a colored woman and a man who was her slave. Was this a kind of miscegenation? she wondered" (p. 292).

The moral ambiguity at the heart of the text is mirrored by its aesthetics. The textured characterizations, detailed descriptions, spellbinding plot, and elegant prose provide a luxurious reading experience. But these qualities constitute the medium through which readers are seduced into contemplating the outrages and ambiguities at the heart of the system of slavery: the meaning of trafficking in human property, the erotics and sexual protocols of the master-slave relationship, the implications of buying one's own children out of slavery and therefore owning one's own offspring, the tenuous position of freed people. Moreover, the presence in the text of imagined twentieth-century scholars who have made their careers out of their research on slavery suggests a link between historical and contemporary commodification of black labor and bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Given the limits of space, I can only begin in this essay to capture the range and complexity of this genre of writing. While some of these texts have already inspired a rich and illuminating body of critical writings, very little has been written about most of them. Moreover, there is every indication that black writers will continue to wrestle with the legacy of slavery in contemporary culture. With the steady stream of historiographical research on New World slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, the emergence of new editions of little-known slave narratives, and persistent questions about reparations for the descendants of former slaves, new perspectives on the institution of slavery are certain to emerge. Indeed, the publication of Francis Bok's *Escape from Slavery* (2003) and Mende Nazari's *Slave* (2005), two

accounts of the authors' experience of slavery in Sudan, remind us that slavery as an institution is not an obsolete historical practice. Regrettably, the notion of the neo-slave narrative may need to be expanded to include slave narratives by former slaves written (and not merely reprinted) in the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank Clarence E. Walker for his help with this essay.
  2. Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 289.
  3. Ashraf Rushdy, *The Neo-Slave Narrative: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3.
  4. Ashraf Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 33.
  5. Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 4.
  6. Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.
  7. Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 1-3.
  8. For a discussion of the ways in which Bontemps altered the facts of the account, see Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction to the 1992 Edition," *Black Thunder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Other especially compelling readings of the novel include Hazel V. Carby, "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 125-43, and Eric J. Sundquist, "'A Son without Words': *Black Thunder*" in *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp. 92-134.
  9. The trials of the "Scottsboro Boys," as they came to be known, involved nine black teenagers who were falsely accused of raping two young white women on March 25, 1931 on a Southern Railroad freight train. Sundquist explores this connection at some length in "'A Son without Words.'"
    9. Interior monologue refers to a technique by which an author represents a character's (or group of characters') thoughts directly, in his or her (or their) idiom and syntax. Here, for example, is the passage where Old Bundy's burial is described:
 

Down, down, down: old Bundy's long gone now. Put a jug of rum at his feet. Old Bundy with his legs like knotty canes. Roast a hog and put it on his grave. Down, down. How them victuals suit you, Bundy? How you like what we brung you? Anybody knows that dying ain't nothing. You got one eye shut and one eye open, old man. We going to miss you just the same, though, we going to miss you bad, but we'll meet you on t' other side, Bundy.
10. Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936. Rpr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 52.
10. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 black people were not really free in the "free" North either.
11. Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *The Women's Review of Books* 5 (March 1988), 5.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.
13. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), pp. 88-89. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
14. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (winter 1989), 1-34.
15. These texts also bring to mind Ishmael Reed's parodic references not only to such historical figures as Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, but also to such literary figures as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lord Byron, and Edgar Allan Poe in *Flight to Canada*.
16. Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: Amistad, 2003), p. 107. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
17. In interviews, Jones admits that while he collected shelves of books about slavery, he actually did only minimal research on the topic before he began to write the novel; he "just didn't want to fill [his] head with all that stuff." See, for example, Robert Birnbaum. "Author of *The Known World* Converses with Robert Birnbaum" *identitytheory.com* 21 January 2004. <<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum138.php>>