

Beloved: America's Grammar Book

Karla FC Holloway

When the music entered the window . . . [b]oth women heard it at the same time. . . [W]here the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for *Beloved*'s hand. Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.

– Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 261. Copyright © 1987 by Toni Morrison. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

KARLA FC HOLLOWAY is the James B. Duke Professor of English at Duke University, where she is also Professor of Law and Professor of Women's Studies. Her books include *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (2014), *Private Bodies, Public Texts: Race, Gender, and a Cultural Bioethics* (2011), and *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White: A Memoir* (2006).

The expressive license within this epigraph, an extraordinary passage from Toni Morrison's quintessential American masterpiece *Beloved*, takes up the implicit challenge of a literary fiction: the authority in (and of) a literary imagination. This gathering of women's voices enables this speaking text – a "talking book" in the tradition of African American

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letters – that at once nominates, engages, and liberates the poetic voice. The passage gestures toward an essential complexity even as it maps a route toward understanding the ways in which America, and in particular this formerly enslaved community, has an exquisitely sculpted potential to survive the terror in our nation's history. This potential might be as insistent as the immediate conundrum in the novel's narrative: how the black folk who were experiencing a tenuous freedom in Ohio might live without the detritus of the past as a disabling accompaniment. The return of Sethe's dead daughter Beloved as a fleshly inhabitation threatens her mother's, her sister's, and the new community of freed and escaped black folk's opportunity to safely manage their lives beyond (and without) the shadow of enslavement, which maliciously haunts their new and quasi-liberated landscape.

In the context of America's literary history, *Beloved's* inhabitation explores the ways in which race in America is deeply embedded in persons, in our language, and as a consequence of these first two, in our national narratives. The persistence of a national paradigm of race that exists between persons, that constructs racialized identities, and that seeps into our linguistic and literary structures constitutes a particular and perhaps a peculiar American grammar. In the vulnerable era of *Beloved's* setting, the perplexities of the U.S. legal framework surrounding property allowed the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to render a personal act of self-determination, such as escape, into a confounding shape-shift whereby a freed and legal black body is not quite either: neither free nor endowed with liberal, legal personhood. Instead, escaped slaves were vulnerable to recapture. As persons who were also property, they were liminal bodies whose presence oddly clarified, instantiated, and confused the tangle of U.S. personhood – arguably

the most critical nomination within the U.S. Constitution's declaration of the nation's insistent and principled autonomy. It was fully and absolutely a reasonable terrain for a ghost.

As long as the threat of recapture loomed, these people were too much like Beloved herself, caught in the interstices between personhood and fracture, freedom and fugitivity, fiction and fact. Because race mattered, its regulatory language clarified national personhood even as it confused private personhood. The Constitution's representation clause assured the nation's failure to perfect its union.¹ In fact, the mark it left, even after it was overturned by the 14th Amendment, would come to be as telling as a slaver's brand. The consequence of constitutionally inscribed partial personhood lingered like a bookmark in the literary, legal, and even social texts that would follow.

In *Beloved's* experiment with the intertextuation of words, bodies, and imagery, Morrison encapsulates a brief but critical and deadly serious *jouissance* with America's racial shadows as literary scaffolding. The novel's imagery, narrative, and characters excavate the interdisciplinary architectures of the deeply racialized texts that constitute our laws and compose our national literatures. Even its origin story is complicit. Morrison was prompted to create the fiction after reading an 1856 newspaper article from *The Cincinnati Enquirer* about an escaped slave, Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter when confronted with slave catchers who had tracked her down in Ohio and attempted to return her to her "owner" in Kentucky. It's this engagement between Morrison's fiction and the narrative fact of race in the United States that makes the evidence of what becomes an oddly reasonable terrain for racialized literary allusions as fateful as it is necessary.² The fullness of America's racially haunted

history is a regulatory accompaniment to America's literary narratives. The way in which *Beloved* exposes this history as a necessary utility in American storytelling is what makes this book so extraordinary in our literary history and so revelatory of the ways in which the histories of our national literary landscape have been sculpted by our "play in the dark."

Morrison engaged that literary landscape and history in her 1992 William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University. The lectures were later published as a monograph, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.³ I see a slender but rigorous trace between the capacious subject of those lectures – American civilization – and her unbounded proffer in *Beloved* when she writes that "not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief."⁴ *Beloved's* domestic site is the nation's homeland – without exception and without any demarcation other than their domestic location. Morrison's interest is similarly domestic in *Playing in the Dark*. There she explains how a "contemplation of [black people] . . . is central to any understanding of our national literature." Her argument explores how the consequently "coded language and purposeful restrictions of this Africanist presence . . . extend into the twentieth century."⁵ In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison reveals the ways in which America's house (and not only its fiction by and about American black folk) is haunted by race. Her own excavation of that ghostly habitation is imaginatively reconstructed in the novel that preceded those lectures by just a few years. *Beloved* explored the ways in which our national narratives would be similarly haunted: in the nation's keys and its codes, in its imagery and through its gestures, in its architecture and its corporeal embodiments.

This is why it is particularly important to notice the literary landscape in the passage I've isolated – how the "yard meets the road." Although the yard is a domestic and privately bounded space, it reaches toward the road's public path. It is an invitation for the reader to map a new dimension in what Morrison locates as "a critical geography" and to follow the exemplary but vexed terrain that has contoured America's private and public interstices.⁶ In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama explains how "landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination."⁷ The cultural conundrum of our national homeland is that it has been both bound and free, and that *textural* battle has shaped the landscapes in our literary imaginations. When I first read *Beloved*, I was well-schooled enough to recognize it as a descriptive grammar for my own work in American literary and cultural studies. But it is only now that I recognize its liberating creative license.

Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature, the book that I believe will be the capstone of my critical writing, has, at the very least, a far better grasp of the challenge of and potential in critical theory and literary text than did my first book, *The Character of the Word*, an outgrowth of my doctoral dissertation.⁸ I begin the epilogue in *Legal Fictions* with an epigraph of my own composition. It deliberately engages the fanciful potential in our words – what writer and philosopher Owen Barfield would have called an exploration of the aesthetic imagination in poetic diction. It is, for Barfield, "a felt change of consciousness."⁹ *Legal Fictions* embraces that shadow:

Our shadows linger and leak. They seep from mottled grey and scaffold scalar recollections. They assure our potential, securing it by ways and means at once penumbral and exquisite. They instantiate things re-

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remembered past their time, promised beyond situation.¹⁰

Legal Fictions explores the consequence of the law’s persistent constitution of race as a category that matters in American socialities. It is a sustained meditation on the consequential literary imagination that such a scaffolding encourages, especially with literature’s memory of slavery as “remembered past its time, promised beyond situation.”¹¹ In the first chapter, “Bound by Law,” I make what some may read as a provocative argument as to why literary allusion is like legal precedent. I use *Beloved* to provide the illustration that I believe is credible and theoretically rigorous enough to sustain the weight I assign to our nation’s particular interplay of law and literature. To explain the literary representation of precedent, I recall this scene from *Beloved*, in which Sethe explains her idea of a “rememory” to her daughter Denver. Morrison writes:

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. . . . [T]he place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside of my head. I mean even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on . . . and you think it’s you thinking it up. . . . But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.¹²

Beloved exemplifies the rigorously creative textual standard within the factual histories and execution of American letters, the codes of our conduct as well as the liberal principles that govern usage. It forces

us to confront the ethic of racial reasoning that produces the nonsense that comes from our insistence that race and the standing of one’s national personhood have a reasonable relationship. It also encourages the haunting persistence that exacts a toll on our national memory and contemporary socialities.

When *Beloved* was published, I was nearly a decade into my own scholarly career. I did notice its exquisite and even painful architecture of words that structured America’s legal and literary stories into a narrative terror. But I had neither the experience nor the *chutzpah* to claim myself as being among those who might take advantage of the resident opportunity in that complex congregation of women whose voices carried “the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words.” As a linguist, my scholarly perspective had been trained to notice the deep structures as well as the surface structures of language use, the compositions in its words, syntax, morphology, and phonology – and especially the principles and imagery that inhere – their moorings and their metaphors. *Beloved* became the book that encouraged my notice, and further than that, it urged me to do the work myself and claim the opportunity extended in that choral moment. I deliberately engaged this opportunity as I composed *Legal Fictions*, the book that *Beloved* made possible, and where I gave myself permission for moments of uninhibited play with literary language’s liberal imagination.

In the passage from *Beloved* quoted above, the grammar – linguistic and literary structures both – of America’s racial legacy are on display. Morrison instantiates this critical linguistic potential and bookmarks the moment, making certain that it is passed on to the reader.¹³ I was critically sophisticated enough to recognize its importance and to highlight the passage in my first

reading of the novel. But I was clearly not insightful enough to grasp the scholarly and creative opportunity offered to me or to notice that I too could be in that company – invited in, and offered a measure of whole notes.¹⁴

The choral gathering is as traditional to the literary text as it is extraordinarily endowed in this novel. For as much as it echoes the spoken word traditions of the Greek tragedians, *Beloved's* chorus is written as a post-modern collage of voices imbued with an essential American text regarding their luminous performance of linguistic dexterity. The company – the congregation – of women matters. This is no singular task. The women gather in order to build “voice upon voice” until their tone settles into a wide “wave of sound” that could accomplish the necessary spiritual work and reach the regions that seemed beyond their everyday capabilities. When they did, Sethe “tremble[d] like the baptized” – a clear indication that she had been touched.

It wasn't immediately apparent what potential *Beloved* offered me. It was clearly the book that explored, as well as encouraged, the possibilities in the words I might choose to engage the literary discipline of U.S. African American literatures, the major focus of my scholarly oeuvre. And my background in linguistics prepared me for the deep structures buried in the grammars of our dialects and helped me navigate the “deep waters” that Morrison plumbs in *Beloved*. That extraordinarily empowered gathering that broke through the haunt of the novel underscores the work that a notice of grammar might accomplish to excavate American literature's stories as well as the ways in which race continues its spectral hold on our nation's imagination. But at the time I first read *Beloved*, I maintained my distance from their offering, satisfied to simply appreciate the stunning narrative within.

In my selected excerpt, Morrison writes that the women's congregated voices find communion under “a hot, cloudless sky . . . as if the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves.” Earlier in the novel, Morrison describes the Clearing as a place that was “green and blessed,” a place where the motley community could become “flesh” – surely a signifying allusion to the biblical gospel where the word becomes flesh. This embodiment is formed in a quintessentially American way because it was only in the United States where fully (rather than fractionally) fleshed black personhood was legally challenged. As a consequence, the literary bodies – black and white both – had potential to harm and be harmed. The women's gathering is defiant in its collaborative empowerment, but also vulnerable in the ways their congregated presence makes them dramatically visible and easily heard (“When the music entered the window . . . [b]oth women heard it at the same time”). Their offering is as bold as it is endangered, and it deploys the very contradiction of their presence in an American community. But it is also generous and salvific. The women use the moment to reclaim Sethe back into their vital community, to give her living daughter Denver the future they all struggled to enable, and to place the haunt of the past back into the unreasonable shadow of its origin.

So it is a choice the women make to claim the freedom road as a space cleared for communion. Despite the bounded private property of the yard in front of them, and despite the peril in memories, they gather to preserve and protect what could eventually become the post-slavery public potential of their persons. Their convention uses the only text they have in common as the route to restoration. My selected passage's reference to “the Clearing” – a critically capitalized site in this text – is an essential nomination of the place

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that has already assured these women their salvific potential. It is the site where Beloved's grandmother, Baby Suggs Holy, preached the sermon that explicated the challenge confronting this newly freed, escaped, and hopeful yet haunted community. She understands their synecdochic dismemberment and the alienation of their bodies from self-love. She preached: "love your flesh . . . your eyes . . . your hands . . . your mouth. *You* got to love it. . . . *You*. For this is the prize." Like the final gathering of women, this early communal gathering held its music as well: "Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh."¹⁵ Later, when the women who had danced in the Clearing come together to use the force of their congregation to send Beloved back to memory, they use their restored, re-membered, and loved black bodies and their gathered sounds as "the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words," fracturing the text of their enslavement.

Morrison's *Beloved* excavated the ways in which our national literatures could help the nation understand the relational racial realities that our laws have instantiated and that our literatures remember. This underbelly of our constitution would mean that "reconstruction" would not simply be a notable era and event in our post-slavery history, but it would also have to be a moment when the fractured national body would require reconstitution and when America as a predator would have to reconstruct its prey as its prospect. But before there would be private bodies that mattered to history, or to our laws, there had to be public texts that were cognizable. Race was America's syntactic structure. Like a grammar, it held together the inherent complexities and contradictions.

Our laws' instantiation of racial rules made the plain fact of our legal fictions a regulatory apparatus – a structural social

reality. Race was a legal fiction worthy of the nation's literary imagination. Morrison was composing America's *grammar* – its art of letters – one that explored the potential of coherence after the incoherence of slavery, America's legal institution of fractionalized personhood, and America's (re)constitution of its bodied politics.¹⁶

In a 1989 review of the novel, I wrote that *Beloved* "is not a 'ghost story.'" I declared that instead "it is a spiritual."¹⁷ The distinction helped me explain what I then saw as a crucial difference, one that spoke of the translucent lingering that is less maleficent than it is confused. A ghost story has little of the agency that *Beloved* commands, almost as if she is taking up the challenge extended in the epigraph I used to introduce my review essay: "One wants a teller in a time like this."¹⁸ *Beloved* inhabits the novel as if she alone is the teller. She is certainly the one who is left to judge – to determine whether her mother's act was one of desperate kindness or desperate cruelty. She alone has the standing to speak through the murkiness of the reader's ethical dilemma – was Sethe's act murder or mercy? – and she was left to suffer the peculiar consequence of her early death. *Beloved*'s persistent, troubled, and finally insistently and deadly loving spirit underscores the complexity of the era but also makes necessary the community's and the reader's disengagement from her. The gathering of women is as necessary to the novel as it is to the reader. Their daringly engaged spirituality made certain there would be others who could be tellers, and they extend this potential to any who would use and remember the language and the texts that come from our history – whether they be fictions or facts. Even though the women have no quotidian vocabulary to exorcize Sethe's daughter, they clearly have an extraordinary spiritual reach that is enough for the task.

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In a characteristically savvy play with our national grammar, Morrison ends *Beloved* with a warning: “It is not a story to pass on.”¹⁹ The preposition “on” allows the sentence to mean *it is not a story to be avoided*, even though its first meaning suggestively retains the intent of “on” as a particle: *it is not a story to share*. With that final syntactic complexity, Morrison explains how America’s grammar contains structural contradictions even as it unleashes creative potential.

At this particular moment in the middle of my fourth decade as a scholar, I feel fully embraced by that gathering of women.

In fact, I feel as if I am not only among their company but absolutely entitled to the license and creativity they engage. *Beloved’s* gathered women, the ones who hold the key and whose empowered sound can break the back of words, have given me license to my own life in letters and have challenged me to join the choir. I sing alto. And “who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”²⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Article I, section II of the U.S. Constitution, also known as the representation clause, declared that each slave would count as “three-fifths of a free person” in matters of congressional representation and taxation. It protected the property of those who held slaves but at the same time quixotically rendered the enslaved to both categories: they were property as well as (partial) persons.
- ² In 1856, Margaret Garner and her family escaped from Kentucky to Cincinnati. They were found by slave catchers and returned to their owners, but not before Garner killed her daughter with a butcher knife. As tragic and pitiful as this story is by itself, its accompanying legal conundrum marks the case as one that explains the peculiar intersectionality of persons and property. Garner’s defense lawyer, hoping her trial might be in a free state, claimed she was a person who committed murder. But Kentucky argued for federal rule; she was property to be returned to her owner. See Stephen Weisenberger, *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).
- ³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- ⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 5.
- ⁵ Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*, 5–6.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. Morrison explains that the chapters in *Playing in the Dark* would “put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into . . . a wider landscape. I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography.”
- ⁷ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 61.
- ⁸ Karla FC Holloway, *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston* (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987). The dissertation, *A Critical Investigation of Literary and Linguistic Structures in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston*, was submitted to Michigan State University in 1978 to fulfill the requirements of my Ph.D. in English and linguistics.
- ⁹ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (1928; Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 48. Here Barfield explains “aesthetic imagination” as a “felt change of consciousness.”
- ¹⁰ From Karla FC Holloway, *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

"Beloved": ¹¹ Ibid.

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¹² Morrison, *Beloved*, 35 – 36.

¹³ As I write "linguistic and literary structures" I recall the title of my 1978 doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Investigation of Literary and Linguistic Structures in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston*. It is with some satisfaction that I notice this consistency in my vision and interests, and that even then I was focused on the combinations, both "the key [as well as] the codes."

¹⁴ I believed then, as I do now, this to be a correct (and decidedly humbling) determination of the reviewer who expressed her disappointment in the execution of *The Character of the Word*. Cheryl Wall suggested that there was more potential in the title than the text of my dissertation-become-book. See Cheryl A. Wall, "Black Women Writers: Journey Along Motherlines," *Callaloo* 39 (Spring 1989): 419 – 422.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 88 – 89.

¹⁶ The derivation of the word *grammar* is from the Greek *grammatike (tekhne)*, or "art of letters."

¹⁷ Karla FC Holloway, "Beloved: A Spiritual," *Callaloo* 13 (Summer 1990): 516 – 525.

¹⁸ Ibid. The epigraph is the title and first line of a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, "One Wants a Teller," in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 132.

¹⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 275.

²⁰ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Random House, 2010), 581.