

history or of natural phenomena with Christ's resurrection. Christian liturgy records, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." In the Christian tradition, the apocalypse refers to the promise of a messianic kingdom as a final cause, as well as a chronological cause, of change in the cyclic order of natural phenomena.

Beloved's exorcism aims to get rid of an evil presence that makes Sethe's family dysfunctional. Beloved's resurrection bears no promise of eternal life even though she has a traumatic effect on communal relationships. Schoolteacher's visit to Baby Suggs's yard, when Beloved's infanticide takes place, marks an apocalyptic moment in the life of Sethe's community, and the community's visit to Sethe's yard marks another apocalyptic moment. In both instances, trauma arouses the conscience of the community. The first instance entails hostile reactions to the infanticide, which lead to Sethe's legal and social imprisonment; the second entails her liberation from social oppression and her inability to change the distorted concept of temporal logic.

Morrison's mention of the "devil's confusion" at the beginning and end of her novel points to a signifying system that crystallizes the overall meaning of the text. Her use of biblical allusions recalls Catholic writers like Flannery O'Connor and Graham Greene, who also present the complexity of temporal logic in natural phenomena through apocalyptic juxtaposition of destruction and reconstruction. However, unique to Morrison's novel is the contrast between "[j]ust weather" and unjust communal attitudes. She delimits time not only to resurrect the ghost of Beloved but also to bring about a conciliatory change in communal relations. The exorcism of the ghost implies a return to the cyclic order of natural phenomena, linking the traumatic moment with signs of hope. Perpetuating mourning for the ghost of Beloved means perpetuating the apocalyptic trauma with no hope for moral rectitude. Morrison's fiction poses the question of whether the temporal logic of history and human experience can be separated from the cyclic order of natural phenomena.

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To the Editor:

James Berger states that "slave infanticide was extremely rare" (417-18), but in working on my study of law and African American narrative, I have found evidence that establishes the practice. In *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (1992), Victoria E. Bynum writes,

[Angela] Davis, [Paula] Giddings, [Deborah Gray] White, and [Elizabeth] Fox-Genovese have noted slave women's propensity for arson, poisoning, the feigning of female illness and pregnancies to escape work, and occasional acts of abortion and infanticide. Because of slave women's responsibilities to children and family, they usually resisted enslavement by engaging in acts of individual rather than collective defiance. . . . In March 1836, for example, the superior court of Granville County charged Hannah, the slave of Col. John G. Hart, with murdering her son Solomon by slashing his throat with a knife she had obtained the night before from the plantation dairy. She also slit her own throat in an unsuccessful attempt to kill herself. As she lay bleeding, she called out to a black man passing by to "come there and put her away." Hannah survived to face trial and conviction on murder charges.

(5, 40)

In his "fugitive slave" account, G. W. Offley describes his mother's confrontation with her dead master's family over their refusal to allow her to purchase her children. Told that they would buy the children and kill her husband on the auction ground if he tried to stop them, she warned them, "[B]uy them and welcome, but you had better throw your money in the fire, for if you buy one of my children, I will cut all three of their throats while they are asleep, and your money will do you no good" (*A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man and Local Preacher* . . . [1860; 1971] 131).

It may be important to correct the record here because Berger seems to tie his neoliberal reading of *Beloved* to the idea of a repressed memory of black intrafamily violence apotheosized by slave infanticide. As best I can understand, while Berger believes that slave infanticide was extremely rare, its very exceptionality allows him, or Morrison, to extrapolate from it to the generalized notion of socially induced violence. In Berger's logic, it was because, except for the Garner case, infanticide didn't exist that Morrison could choose it.

Well, it did exist and was known enough to be recognizable as a trope of resistance to slavery. But it takes a considerable stretch to equate it with intrafamilial violence in a way that would serve Berger's argument. The record of antebellum family life among enslaved people must be read more carefully than Berger has done. An understanding of African American family life in the years between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century depends on knowledge of four narrative forms: fiction, history, law, and memory. The first three have been denied to African Americans for most of their sojourn in North America. As Mrs. N. F. Mossell put it in her 1908 advice book to black women, "As a rule, a race writes its history in its laws and in its records. Not so the Afro-American: he could make no law; deprived of the opportunity to write, he could leave no written

word; he could only protest against the injustice of his oppressors in his heart, in his song, and in his whispered consolations to the suffering and dying" (*The Work of the Afro-American Woman* [1908] 49).

The significance of Morrison's decision to build her novel on Garner's story may not lie in its ability to support the neoliberal agenda Berger finds in her text. She could have chosen from among scores of examples of "historical trauma" to make the case Berger ascribes to her. I see no reason to think that the exceptionality of slave infanticide makes it starkly symbolic of the unthinkable and therefore useful to Morrison as a sign of induced but repressed pathology. It is more likely that the act whispers of an unspeakable desperation hidden from whites but part of the memory of the race.

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#### Reply:

Mabel Khawaja is right to note that the apocalypse in Christian thinking is a revelatory catastrophe that ushers in a new world purged of evil: a new Jerusalem. Since Morrison invokes the imagery of Christian apocalypse, it is reasonable to ask whether she means for her story to be read in the ultimately optimistic terms of Christian theology, as Khawaja suggests. I continue to believe that this optimistic reading is not the best one. First, Morrison's use of Christian apocalyptic imagery does not necessarily imply her full acceptance of Christian theology. It is certainly possible to separate the destructive aspects of apocalypse from the salvational, as has generally been done in twentieth-century apocalyptic representations. Second, the spirit of Morrison's *Beloved* is not in keeping with the book of Revelation's overpowering hatred not merely of particular social evils and abuses but of social and natural processes. "Babylon" is the world; economic exchange, art, procreation are utterly corrupt and doomed to the obliteration of the "second death." Finally, I believe that the possibility Khawaja raises of "perpetuating the apocalyptic trauma with no hope for moral rectitude" is an open question at the end of *Beloved*. I would still argue that the novel presents the exorcism of *Beloved* as preceding—and preventing—a working through of the traumas she embodies by the African American community or by more-extensive communities. The ghost of *Beloved* continues to return. I can't see any evidence in the novel that she is gone for good or that her disappearance brings about any national moral-political transformation.

Jon-Christian Suggs claims that I underestimate the frequency of slave infanticide, that the link I make between Sethe's infanticide and the recent discourses regarding violence in African American communities and families is a "stretch," and that as a white critic I do not have access to certain elements of African American historical experience that he situates in a zone of racial memory. I look forward to reading Suggs's book and examining his evidence that slave infanticide was not rare. In his letter he presents one instance of infanticide and one of a threat to commit infanticide. The sources he cites do not contradict the ones I used in reaching my evaluation—for instance, in Suggs's quotation Victoria Bynum concludes that acts of infanticide were "occasional." In *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes that "the extreme forms of resistance—murder, self-mutilation, infanticide, suicide—were rare" (329). There seems to be a consensus here, as I indicated in my article.

Suggs's complaint that my argument is a stretch warrants more-detailed criticism of my historical narrative of the liberal discourse on race and of my interpretation of Morrison's text. The frequency of slave infanticide is irrelevant—a footnote—to my argument. Morrison's work consistently addresses individual and collective acts of self-destruction within African American communities, in the context of racist institutions. It is part of her greatness as a novelist that she can portray unflinchingly both the destructive pressures of a racist society and the often self-destructive responses of African Americans. It is clear where she assigns blame, but blaming does not erase the traumatic aftermaths of intracommunity violence. "[U]nspeakable desperation," as Suggs puts it, is a good description. I prefer "trauma" in writing about Morrison because of the tendency, which she observes, of desperate acts to repeat themselves, as Sethe's attack on Bodwin repeats her self-protective and self-destructive attack on her child.

It does not seem to me a stretch to argue that Morrison responded to the political controversies of the time in which she wrote. Nor is it a stretch to suggest that the Moynihan report of 1965 haunted racial discourses of the 1980s. I grant that aligning Toni Morrison with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, even in the qualified way that I have done, may seem surprising, but I hope that the historical context I presented, combined with my reading of *Beloved*, makes the link plausible.

Finally, Suggs appeals to racial memory as an arbiter of critical debates. While thinking about this point, I re-read Ann duCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies"