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# “It was not a story to pass on”: Examining the Impossibility of a Complete Understanding of the Black Slave Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and the Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave

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***“It was not a story to pass on”*: Examining the Impossibility of a Complete Understanding of the Black Slave Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and the *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave***

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**Abstract**

By synthesizing Toni Morrison's historical fiction novel *Beloved* with the historical records of *the Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave*, and other documents, readers can distinguish the ways that these texts present the notion of an impossibility of a complete understanding of the black slave experience. Specifically, for the contemporary black reader, the problem of having access to one's own heritage arises within this impossibility. As an experience that was largely undocumented, and fundamentally distinct from any other experience, the present day audience must learn to accept when limitations arise in their comprehension of this history. These texts both force the readers to take responsibility for the knowledge that can be obtained, and respect the knowledge that remains distanced and unattainable as part of the horrific black slave experience.

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*“To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way”*

### **Introduction: Looking to Our Nation’s Dark Past**

Examining both factual and fictional records of American slavery in order to try to shape an understanding of what slavery meant, and what slavery did to its victims, has been no simple task, to say the least. The biggest obstacle I have encountered is the sheer fact that the majority of written historical records left today are not direct records composed by slaves and former slaves themselves, and are instead what we might call “second-hand sources” of the African and African American slave experience (Holmes). These second-hand sources are mediated through white people of the time, such as slave ship captains, slave owners, slave traders, slave bounty hunters, etc. The few narratives that we do have were mostly recorded by white authors as they listened to the account of a former slave, like the WPA narratives of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Holmes). There are a few exceptions of slave narratives that are written by the former slaves themselves, both before and after the abolition of slavery, but even within these exist many holes in an otherwise full account of their lives as slaves. Thus, investigating sources such as these presents a quite difficult undertaking of trying to gain a picture of an authentic understanding of slavery from the black slave perspective. Luckily, there have been some contemporary authors who have tackled this era, creating their own imaginings of slave life, which strive to fill in the gaps of this history that has otherwise been unrecorded and unremembered in the textual or narrative format. A work of historical fiction can invite a more complex comprehension of slavery as it can in many ways pick up where the historical records left off. Therefore, in order to explore how one goes about pursuing a more complex understanding of slavery through the lens of those who were victims of it, as well as through the mediated sources, I have synthesized

historical records with historical fiction. The historical records I have studied are composed of three documents housed in the Special Collections department of Norlin Library at the University of Colorado-Boulder: an original copy of an 1850 slave narrative, the *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave*, an 1856 bill of sale for a slave boy, and an 1857 list of slaves for auction. The historical fiction text I have studied is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, published in 1987. I would also like to take this opportunity to define one particular term I use throughout my analysis, which is "the reader." When I use this term, I am specifically referring to a contemporary, American reader, and within specific examples, the African American contemporary reader.

Thus, as I examined both historical records with historical fiction, I could distinctly grasp the ways which these both push the reader toward a profound, more involved understanding of slavery. As Watson gave the facts of his experience as a slave, Morrison filled in the graphic details of post-slave life through her characters, addressing that missing component from Watson's account. Focusing on the truths of slavery, Watson's narrative was specifically arguing for the abolition of the inhumane institution. On the other hand, writing long after the end of this institution, Morrison hones in on the aftermath of slave-life, and acknowledges the trauma former slaves continued to deal with even after reaching freedom. The records of the slaves for sale are at first impactful just by simple observation. Looking at a list of names, of real people, knowing that they had no freedom and no rights, is extremely disturbing. However, while these historical documents of the slave-era are extremely valuable in consideration with the historically fictional text, they all inherently insist on boundary of the access available to that authentic black perspective for the reader. Though each strives to open the eyes and hearts of the readers to the horrors of slavery, all the texts and documents present this idea that a complete, comprehensive

understanding of slavery is impossible to obtain for those outside of the experience of slavery itself. Specifically, there are two levels of this impossibility of a complete comprehension. The first is the fact that the majority of slaves were silenced from publicly sharing their experiences, never even having the opportunity to record their lives in the narrative form. The second is that considering what records and re-creations we do have, the fact that modern day readers are so removed in time from slavery itself, having never gone through it themselves, presents this impossibility of understanding. I do not argue that because of this limitation, this impossibility, that all efforts to try to understand slavery through the lens of those victims of it should be forgotten or ignored. Instead, I argue that it is critical to continue these efforts of understanding, but with a firm grasp on the fact that it is equally important to accept when limitations arise. The experience of slavery was so profound, so unique, and so impactful, in so many ways, that there must be a certain extent to which anyone outside and separate from the experience can truly understand it. In chapter entitled “Not Only the Footprints but the Water Too and What Is Down There” from *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, author Avery Gordon writes:

Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where people reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about. (Gordon 139)

Since traces of slavery continue to linger modern-day America in regards to the progression of the African American race in this country, as well as the present state of race relations, it is thus necessary to attempt to comprehend the knowledge of a history that explains so much of the present. Therefore, by endeavoring to reach the most comprehensive knowledge granted to us by synthesizing historical records and historical

fiction, we take responsibility for that knowledge, and realize respect for the knowledge we will never access.

The final pages of this section are meant to serve as brief introductions to the specific texts themselves, especially addressing a brief history of slave narratives and the background of the *Narrative of Henry Watson*, as it is one of the lesser-known slave narratives in existence.

### The Texts and Documents: A Brief Introduction

#### *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave*

By the time of the publication of the *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave*, in the year 1848, abolitionists and other former-slaves had been relying on the writing form since around the early 1700s, with the first known slave narrative being published in 1703 (Starling 1). The slave narrative was developed as an effort to persuade white Americans against the system of slavery by exposing the horrendous facts of the institution, and the circumstances African and African American slaves were subjected to. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. point out in their book, *The Slave's Narrative*, that, “the writings of the slaves were used to prove the common humanity and intellectual capacities that persons of African descent shared with Europeans and Americans” (Davis and Gates 3). Not only were the narratives necessary for exposing the truth of slavery, but for also demanding that the audiences recognize the humanity of slaves as equal beings to whites. These narratives were in fact highly successful, and experienced a boom in popularity from the 1830s through the 1860s (Starling 1). The slave narratives proved to be a key component in helping to bring an end to slavery along with the Civil War and the emancipation of all slaves. While authors of slave narratives had to be cautious in the language they used and the specific details they gave, they were nonetheless



extremely powerful in opening the eyes of the American people, and encouraging a shift in perspective on slavery.

Housed in the Special Collections room of Norlin Library at the University of Colorado-Boulder, a third edition of the *Narrative of Henry Watson, A Fugitive Slave*, is carefully maintained 166 years after its publication. At first glance the document would appear to be nothing more than a pamphlet, not bound by a hard cover but merely thin, deteriorating paper. On the front cover is an illustration, a scene of the former slave himself attending to his white masters at the dinner table. The narrative was originally published in 1848 by Bela Marsh of Boston. According to information provided by the American Antiquarian Society, Marsh “issued many slave narratives and books on spiritualism, and he was generally supportive of abolitionist causes” ([www.americanantiquarian.org](http://www.americanantiquarian.org)). Boston was a central city for anti-slavery crusaders, and considering that Watson made his escape there, it is evident that this is one important reason why he had the opportunity to share his story.

In his narrative, Henry Watson goes over the details of his life as a slave: his childhood, his many masters and his experiences while enslaved to each, and in the final pages, he documents the circumstances of his escape. The narrative opens with a preface that explains the author’s intention to give a completely factual account of his experience as a slave without any exaggeration or embellishment. Watson writes, “My aim has been simply to present a faithful record of only a few of the transactions I have been eye-witness of, hoping that a perusal of them might add something to the already abundant testimony of the horrors of the slave system” (Watson iii). This sort of opening phrase was very common amongst slave narratives, as the authors navigated the difficult task of trying to persuade the white readers against slavery, while also not putting the audience in a defensive position, as this would completely work against what

the authors set out to accomplish. The white audience had to be dealt with in a particular manner; they needed to be persuaded, not directly attacked by the authors, and they also needed to believe that they were merely getting the facts, and not an “exaggerated” tale. James Olney writes in his article, ““I Was Born”: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” that:

The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of “slavery *as it is*.” Thus it is the writer’s claim, it *must* be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of *poiesis*... To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, a neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty—indeed, if it were creative it would be *eo ipso* faulty for “creative” would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for “lying.” (Olney 150)

Olney pin-points the difficulty authors of slave narratives had, as they needed to be as factual as possible in order to have credibility with their white audiences, while at the same time they also needed to be persuasive to show that the institution of slavery was completely inhumane. If the white audience thought the narrative was “creative,” then this would be taken as a form of lying, and the narrative would lose all of its value in their eyes, especially those white readers who were already disbelieving that slavery was really an immoral practice. It is hard to imagine how ex-slaves would have felt trying to express their experiences while under such rigid constraints, with so much of their story being silenced in order to appease the white audience. It is quite clear that Watson felt these constraints as he narrates his experiences in a collected tone, avoiding dwelling on his own emotions for too long. Yet, it is within these certain gaps that Watson demonstrates to his readers that even if he were to continue on, explaining with the most intricate details, there would still be this apparent distance for the reader from completely understanding his time as a slave. Following his preface, the narrative begins. Watson was born into slavery, and estimates his birth in the year 1813 near the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia, under the ownership of a man named Bibb.

Despite Watson's many instances of sticking to the stylistic conventions of slave narratives, his story does particularly stand out from most other slave narratives as it is not framed by a white advocate's testimonial on the validity of the narrative. Raymond Hedin explains in the opening of his article "Strategies of Form in the American Slave Narrative," that:

To read nineteenth-century slave narratives is to be reminded that the black American written narrative tradition began "enclosed" in some ways by literary forms bequeathed to it by whites. The reminder comes immediately and visually through the letters from northern patrons which precede and follow almost all the narratives of this period and which testify to the narrator's accuracy, his character, his very existence... The testimonial framework validated the narrator as well as the narrative; it confirmed his success in his necessary if reluctant self-defense and predisposed other readers in his favor. (Hedin 25-26)

This type of framework, restricting as it was, would at least have led to a more positive reception of the narrative as the target audience for slave narratives was the white community, and provided the opportunity for abolitionists to "establish the full humanity of the slave" (Hedin 26). The framework worked to gain credibility for the narrator and the narrative itself as the white audience was given this validation from another white person. One then has to wonder why Henry Watson's narrative was not framed by such a testimonial, and instead immediately begins with Watson's own words. Watson explains towards the end of his narrative that he had been in touch with William Lloyd Garrison after his escape to the North, who was one of the most recognized and well-regarded abolitionists of the time, so he most certainly would have had the connections to incorporate such testimonials in his narrative. Nonetheless, to read this narrative in the present day, this 'missing' component of the white testimony actually allows for more authenticity and agency to the black writer as it is free from the constraints of the white framework.

A key component that this narrative does include, however, is the firm declaration that the narrative was "Written by Himself." Toni Morrison discusses in her speech *The Site of Memory* that:

These writers knew that literacy was power. Voting, after all, was inextricably connected to the ability to read; literacy was a way of assuming and proving the “humanity” that the Constitution denied them. That is why the narratives carry the subtitle “written by himself,” or “herself” ...A literate slave was supposed to a contradiction in terms. (Morrison 89)

Though Watson never explains how he became literate, the fact that he did physically write his own narrative provides that much more authenticity to his account, as well as serving as a way to establish his humanity in his own way by demonstrating his literacy and capabilities as a civilized human being. As the rest of Watson’s narrative unfolds, he continues to remind readers of his humanity, and unmask the horrific truths of his experience as a slave, and his escape to freedom.

#### *A List of Slaves, and a Bill of Sale*

The other historical records that I have studied are a list of slaves for sale, and a bill of sale for a young slave boy, both dating from the late 1850s in Iredell, North Carolina. These documents are also maintained by the Special Collections department of Norlin Library at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Unlike the slave narrative, these documents are not penned by the slaves themselves, and instead are creations of the white owner, a man named [Milus] Dobins. They do not tell much of any particular story of the people listed, especially when considering the amount of information offered in Watson’s account. However, these kind of documents do represent a great majority of the type of information left to us about slavery, and African and African American slaves themselves. For the most part, all we have today are artifacts like these that are mediated sources of slavery through the white slave owners, traders, etc. In her book *Beloved: Character Studies*, from the chapter “History and *Beloved*,” Nancy Peterson comments on this nature of trying to comprehend the slave experience while examining

documents prepared by white slave ship captains from the Atlantic slave trade. She contemplates the following:

These historical documents, of course, do not reveal the perspectives of black people suffering and struggling to endure the slave system. Trying to recover this unwritten aspect of history is difficult, if not impossible: how can something that has never been recorded be remembered? And even if that were possible, how many white Americans even today are willing to remember and reckon with an era that was so ignorable and inhumane? (Peterson 21)

Peterson pinpoints the very struggle of trying to understand slave-life and the sufferings when all that is left are names listed, and entire history unrecorded. These slaves' lives are represented, but without any of their own perspective, just like those names listed on the documents I have studied. Peterson also brings up another key point by stating that so many are just unwilling to even try to "remember and reckon with" this part of American history, as contemporary audiences don't want to take responsibility for something that was so horrible, and happened so long ago. Yet, it is extremely valuable to have this kind of encounter with historical records such as these as it defines the very nature of the history of slavery as a history predominantly mediated through the white perspective rather than the black.

### *Beloved*

As a work of historical fiction, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* transcends the boundaries of what is usually depicted of the lives of those in slavery, especially when compared to the historical records we have like slave narratives. Continuing on with the ideas presented in those narratives, Morrison crafts her novel to push her readers to a more personal and intimate understanding of the experiences that African and African American slaves endured. Morrison dedicates her book to "Sixty million and more," which is the rough estimate of the total number of black men, women, and children who died before they even reached slavery on the ships of

the Middle Passage (Clemons 46). Peterson also argues of the novel that “Into this space of national absence and amnesia, Morrison inserts her novel as a memorial to honor and mourn all those who lived in, died from, suffered, and endured the slave system” (Peterson 21). The novel certainly fulfills this role of a memorial to those who suffered and endured slavery as it offers a more complex understanding of the traumatic effects of being enslaved that persist even after becoming free. Linda Krumholz similarly argues of *Beloved* in her article “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison,” that “Morrison’s novel reconstructs slave history in a way that history books cannot, and in a way that cannot be appropriated by objective or scientific concepts of knowledge and history” (Krumholz 407). Filling in the gaps left by the historical records and documents, her novel focuses on the aspects of the slave experience unrecorded by those who directly were victims of it. Morrison writes in her forward that “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (Morrison xviii). Her work is both effective in that it gains perspective for readers, throwing us into the aftermath of slavery from the very first pages, while also establishing certain limitations of accessing a complete knowledge of the experience by maintaining a certain distance for the reader from the events in the novel. Though there is an abundance of characters that could be discussed from the novel, I have decided to focus on Denver, Sethe, Paul D, and Beloved, as I believe they all best function as representations of this limitation of a comprehensive knowledge of the slave experience.

### Evidence of This Impossibility

In order to support my thesis, I will begin with analyzing Denver's character in relation to the reader, as both find themselves in the position of seeking out this knowledge of slavery that continually meets each with limitations. Then, I will focus on specific aspects of Watson's narrative in relation to both Sethe and Paul D's characters, as the three are survivors of slavery, and share many similar experiences. These common particularities of the slave experience delve readers into a more complex understanding of this system and the consequences it had for its victims, which both push the reader to that limitation of understanding while still offering as much knowledge as possible. Finally, I will examine *Beloved's* character in the context of the other historical documents. Morrison writes in her forward to the novel that, "The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it," (Morrison xviii). Both *Beloved* and the names listed on these documents serve to be representations of the larger slave experience, those who "lost everything and had no say in any of it," being of the majority who were silenced.

*“You won’t understand, baby.”*

### **Denver and The Reader: A Parallel Desire to Know**

Morrison constructs *Beloved* in a way that pushes readers into the depths of the intimate experience of post-slave life, exploring both the lives of those directly and indirectly effected by slavery. Through this exploration it becomes quite clear just how complex an understanding of slavery is through the lens of those who experienced it themselves. In Henry Watson’s narrative, on the other hand, readers wonder at the gaps left in his story, striving to imagine what happened in those moments untold or glossed over in an attempt to understand slavery as it was. Similarly, within the context of the novel, Denver, a girl with extremely close ties to slavery, though never a physically enslaved person herself, also tries to get at this understanding of slavery that she feels so isolated from by her mother Sethe. Denver was born into a complicated space (literally in between enslavement and freedom) as her mother gave birth to her while making her escape from Sweet Home to Ohio. Sethe does make it to freedom with Denver, so she therefore never experiences slavery in the same way that her mother did as a slave at Sweet Home. Denver was never owned by another, never considered as a piece of property, and so she doesn’t have the exact knowledge and the experiences that her mother does. She is certainly indirectly affected by slavery as she must survive amongst the aftermath of slave life that her mother struggles with throughout the novel, but, she is ultimately distanced from this part of her mother’s life without the connection of that shared knowledge. Consequently, Denver attempts to deal with this lack of a full comprehension of her mother’s past, which she interprets as an isolation from her mother, which results in their strained relationship with each other. Denver eventually must accept, however, that she will never have that full knowledge of her mother’s past as a slave, just as



readers of *Beloved* and the *Narrative of Henry Watson* must accept their own understanding of the black slave experience will always be met with limitations as both present the impossibility of ever accessing that full understanding.

To begin, it becomes clear early on in the text that Denver desperately wants to be included in this past that Sethe tries to keep hidden from her as her own form of protection for Denver. When Paul D first arrives to 124 Bluestone Road, Denver exudes jealousy to see her mother talking about her past at Sweet Home with him, particularly because he had shared so much of that past with her. Even though their time at Sweet Home was marked by brutal and dehumanizing treatment as slaves, Denver hates the fact she is separate from those experiences and memories. So, to see her mother and Paul D who share that common bond together even furthers her sense of isolation. In the scene of Denver first meeting Paul D, Morrison writes, “They were a twosome, saying ‘Your daddy’ and ‘Sweet Home’ in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her” (Morrison 15). This moment is exceptionally important for a few reasons. First and foremost, it demonstrates the jealous feeling that Denver, who has been working all her life thus far to get at the details of her mother’s past as a slave, is suddenly even more isolated by Paul D’s arrival as they reunite over that specific past. Secondly, it also shows that a major component of Denver’s desire to access her mother’s past is because that time also includes her father, Halle, whom Denver has never known. Not only does Denver want to understand Sethe’s past as a way to feel connected with her mother, but also to feel some sort of connection to her father. It would seem that her immaturity is also reflected through Morrison’s choice to refer to Denver’s impression that this past of Sweet Home and her father “belong” to Sethe and Paul D, and not to her. However, I would argue that it instead appears to be reflective of the lack of access to her own heritage which upsets Denver, which is clear through her desire

to have a stronger connection to her parents and their experiences. Denver is upset that she cannot “have” access to her mother’s past, the very thing she is a product of, and becomes even more upset when Paul D enters the picture as someone who has exactly what she has been wanting all her life. In the same way, reading *Beloved* instigates a similar frustration in the reader. While Morrison creates a powerful narrative that undeniably brings the reader to a deeper and more complex understanding of slavery, and the personal, traumatic effects the institution had on its victims, there is only a certain extent to which the reader’s understanding can be fulfilled. Especially for contemporary readers, who are accustomed to having easy and readily available access to knowledge, it is difficult to then be presented with the notion that in the context of this part of our nation’s past, there is that limit to which we can completely comprehend slavery. Considering specifically a contemporary black audience in this moment, who can trace their lineage back to slavery, it is a lack of access to the exact thing that makes their history what it is. The general contemporary audience is restricted in knowledge to this past, but then the black contemporary audience is thus restricted from their own heritage, which results in such a frustration like Denver experiences. It is a struggle for Denver to accept that there is only so much she can truly understand about her mother’s time as a slave and the effects that that enslavement had, just as it is a struggle for the reader to finally reach the conclusion that there exists this impossibility to fully understanding the black slave experience and those indirectly effected by it though so close in time to the experience. Needing to break up the twosome of Sethe and Paul D, Denver wishes for the appearance of her sister’s ghost as a medium for her to redirect the twosome back to her and Sethe, excluding the stranger she sees as Paul D. Denver tells Paul D that, ““We have a ghost in here’ ...and it worked. They were not a twosome any more” (Morrison 15). However, she is not long satisfied, as Paul D had already

been informed by Sethe of the haunting in their home, and he then precedes to recall to Sethe about the rumored ghost of Sweet Home. Angered that once again the tables are turned and she is back on the outside of their “twosome,” Denver disrespectfully snaps at her mother and Paul D, asking “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed” (Morrison 16). Even though Denver does obviously recognize to a certain extent that Sweet Home was a place of extreme pain and torture for her mother, she lashes out at them because she lacks the knowledge and connection Paul D and Sethe share, and just wants some sort of access to her own heritage.

As previously mentioned, Sethe intentionally keeps Denver distanced from her past as a form of protection for her daughter. Even though Sethe had long been free from Sweet Home, and the institution of slavery itself had been abolished, she still fears that in some way Denver is in danger, reflecting the detrimental pain that Sethe suffered during her time as slave. In feeling isolated from her mother because of this lack of a bond, Denver continually asks her mother about Sweet Home, trying to draw out information to get at that connection. However, Sethe explains to Denver that:

If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place it happened... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what. (Morrison 43-44)

Clearly, Sethe expresses in this passage the strong level of uncertainty she still has about her future and about Denver’s future. She fears that the horrible experiences she went through at Sweet Home could be “waiting” for Denver. This fear truly reveals the depth of her pain that she experienced while a slave, that if Denver were ever to go back there,

history could repeat itself, and Denver would be victim to the same tragedies as Sethe. As I will further discuss Sethe's character in more depth, for Sethe, having freedom means being able to mother her children to her fullest capabilities, so the fear of losing that freedom and not being able to protect her children is incredibly strong in Sethe throughout the novel. The fact of what happened at Sweet Home, slavery itself, will never go away, as it is permanently ingrained in the beings of those who were its victims, existing fixed in that time and place. Of course, however, Denver will never experience it or fully know it, just like readers today will only reach a certain understanding of what it meant to be an enslaved person, and what it then meant to live free in the physical sense after slavery. However, despite the evident impossibility of obtaining a complete comprehensive knowledge of slavery, neither *Beloved* nor the *Narrative of Henry Watson* suggest that this past should be forgotten or ignored because of that limitation. Instead, both texts push readers to that limit of understanding, and then the recognition of the extent to which the knowledge of slavery can be reached, just as Denver comes to realize that she will never truly share a complete connection to her mother's past, but can still appreciate the knowledge she can obtain.

A pivotal moment for Denver starting to recognize her own limitation of understanding her mother's past is her telling the story of her birth to Beloved, who she believes to be the reincarnation of her dead sister. Beloved has the undeniable ability to draw out the stories and repressed memories from the women at 124, and she asks Denver to "Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat" (Morrison 90). Relying solely on the bit and pieces that Sethe had ever told her, in order "to construct out the strings she had heard all her life," Denver begins to tell the story of her birth to Beloved, beginning with Sethe's escape (Morrison 90). This process finally leads to

Denver's recognition that she will only ever know so much of her mother's past. As they recreate the picture of what happened, Denver comes to a much deeper appreciation of her mother's dangerous journey to freedom for the sake of her children's lives, while at the same time discovering her knowledge of it will always be secondary and distanced from the thing itself.

Morrison writes:

Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just hear it: there is this nineteen-year-old slavegirl—a year older than herself—walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. Most of all she is by herself and inside her is another baby she has to think about too. Behind her dogs, perhaps; guns probably; and certainly mossy teeth. She is not afraid at night because she is the color of it, but in the day every sound is a shot or a tracker's quiet step. Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked... Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it... (Morrison 91-92)

Instead of just repeating the words she had heard from her mother, Denver begins to try to imagine it, which helps her get closer towards a connection to Sethe's experience.

Morrison points out that at this retelling, Denver is just a year younger than the age her mother was when she made her escape, and as Denver realizes this she takes one step further towards that understanding. Denver is in the position now to get at somewhat of an empathetic understanding of what her mother went through, as she was "Feeling how it must of felt to her mother," and "Seeing how it must of looked." However, within this progress towards reaching that knowledge, Morrison clearly maintains that the limitations still exist. She does this by specifically using words that signify Denver's incomplete knowledge of the event, like "maybe," "perhaps," and "probably," which indicate that Denver is still at a certain distance from a full comprehension of her mother's escape. Denver constructs the scene from the facts she had heard about it, and then ultimately speculates about the rest. While she can do her best to recreate the experience from the

pieces of the story she had heard from Sethe, in the end there is still that impossibility for her to have access to the actual experience itself and fully comprehend it. Morrison directly spells this out for the reader in the conclusion of this passage as she writes, “Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it” (Morrison 92). Ultimately, the experience is only Sethe’s. Denver was a part of the experience in the sense that she was born during the escape, but she of course would have no memory of the event itself. Denver and Beloved “did the best they could” to reimagine Sethe’s journey, but in the end, “she alone had the mind for it,” and is the only one who could completely know “how it really was.” This process is successful in the sense that Denver is brought closer to the understanding she desperately wants, and successful in that she also realizes that her understanding is going to be met with limitations, which is a compelling moment of acceptance for Denver.

By the end of the novel, Denver has grown into a mature young woman with a new focus on her future that had been redirected from her obsession of trying to penetrate every experience of her mother’s past. As Denver comes to realize and accept that her understanding of what happened at Sweet Home can only reach to a certain extent, she also seems to realize that her mother actively kept her at a distance from those memories as a way to protect her from the pain she continues to deal with. Krumholz argues in her article that, “The novel concludes with Denver’s emergence as the new teacher” (Krumholz 397). Denver seeks out work and some education from the Bodwins in order to help support Sethe, Beloved and herself, and reenters the community that she had been

so withdrawn from for most of her life. Therefore, with her new-found wisdom, confidence, and maturity, Denver is able to recognize that the relationship that has developed between Sethe and Beloved has become seriously unhealthy, also noticing that there was more to Beloved than she originally imagined. Denver eventually reaches out to the rest of the women of the community for help, and they successfully expel Beloved from 124. In fact, when Sethe was overcome with the fear that history was in fact repeating itself and tried to stab Mr. Bodwin as she thought he was coming to take away Beloved, Denver was the first one to “wrestle her mother down” and stop any violence from happening (Morrison 313). While there were certainly many factors at play that lead to Denver’s transformation into a strong young woman, it is clear that one of these key factors was undoubtedly her acceptance of the limitation she would always face in trying to completely know Sethe’s life as a slave. By appreciating the understanding that she could access, she is able to move forward in her life and emerge as an optimistic hope for the future. Similarly, for the reader, it is important to accept when limitations arise in understanding the black slave experience. While at times it can present frustrations, it is ultimately critical to respect these boundaries that set apart such a difficult though unique experience.

In the following two sections, I will explore the similarities in the experiences of Sethe in relation to Henry Watson, and the experiences of Paul D in relation to Henry Watson, as all three represent African American survivors who endured, and escaped from, slavery.

*“Slave life; freed life—every day was a test and a trial”*

### **Comparing *Beloved* and the *Narrative of Henry Watson***

After reading Morrison’s novel and Watson’s narrative, it was quite easy to distinguish to the similarities in the experiences of both the fictional and real survivors of slavery. As Sethe, Paul D, and Henry Watson describe their experiences while enslaved, they provide insight that push readers to deeper appreciations for the sufferings that they endured. At the same time, they also force the reader to recognize when their comprehension of certain aspects of the slave experience meets limitations. I will begin with focusing on Henry Watson and his relation to Sethe in their shared experiences of slavery. First, I will discuss how both characters reflect on the forced separation of family members as being one of the most painful aspects of slave-life. I will then analyze the representation of the dehumanization of slaves as animals that both Watson and Sethe bring to attention in their respective accounts. Finally, I will examine the interpretations of freedom that both characters present as successfully escaped slaves. In the second portion of this section, I will then look to Henry Watson and his relation to Paul D as both have very similar experiences while slaves, as well as after they both reach freedom. I will start with analyzing the challenges the institution of slavery presents for both characters in trying to understand themselves as men. Then, I will focus on the presentations of attempting to recognize self-worth within slavery that both men display in their accounts. Following this, considering that both men have encounters with “kind” slave-owners, I will analyze the actuality of such paternal relationships. Finally, I will close with interpreting the conclusion that both men draw in needing a partner in life who can completely empathize with their pasts as an avenue for moving forward after slavery.



*“More forcibly did I then feel the galling chains of slavery”*

### **Torn Apart: The Separation from Family while Enslaved**

One of the most traumatic and challenging struggles expressed within both the *Narrative of Henry Watson* and *Beloved* is dealing with the forced separation of family members while enslaved. African and African American slaves essentially had no control over when or where they would be sold or traded off, and therefore the threat of being separated from their family members was constant. Heather Andrea Williams discusses this aspect of slavery in her book *Help Me Find My People*, and writes, “One of the many challenges that African Americans encountered in slavery took place on this ground of family separation in a world in which owners possessed the absolute right to sell slaves, to separate children, husbands, and wives” (Williams 48). Despite many African American slaves forming such relationships and having children out of those relationships, they had no agency over maintaining any sort of stability in those family relations as the owners could separate them at their own whim. In the slave narrative, Watson loses the only family member he knew, his mother Letty, at a very young age. In the novel, Sethe is also separated from her own mother at a very young age, and later on from her husband, and then once again threatened with separation when Schoolteacher locates her in Ohio. Morrison explores the consequences of how these experiences of separation had influenced Sethe’s life during and after being enslaved. While Morrison’s presentation of the separation of family members certainly fills in some of the gaps left in Watson’s narrative, both texts ultimately highlight the limitation of the reader to fully understand this particular feature of slave life, furthering the notion of the impossibility of a complete comprehension of slavery through the black slave perspective.

Henry Watson was able to stay with his mother while she worked as a cook for Bibb on his plantation until he was about 8-years old. Sadly, though, one morning Watson awoke to find his mother gone, disappeared in the night, and for some time no one would give him any information about what had happened to her. He writes:

Every exertion was made on my part to find her, or hear some tidings of her; but all my efforts were unsuccessful; and from that day have never seen or heard from her. This cruel separation brought on a fit of sickness, from which they did not expect I would recover. The old slave-woman who took care of me during my sickness, by way of consolation, gave me as much information as she could about my mother's being taken away. She told me that a slave-dealer drove to the door in a buggy, and my mother was sent for to come into the house; when, getting inside, she was knocked down, tied, and thrown into the buggy, and carried away. As the old woman related these things to me, I felt as if all hope was gone; that I was forsaken and alone in this world. More forcibly did I then feel the galling chains of slavery, the cruelty and barbarism arising from it, than I ever have since. I resolved, however, to bear with all patiently, till I became large enough to run away, and search for my mother. (Watson 6)

In this passage, Watson carefully depicts the circumstances of his mother's disappearance while including some of his own personal suffering from the experience. Watson makes the claim that this forced separation from his mother was the hardest detail of his life that he ever faced while in slavery, and eloquently writes, "More forcibly did I then feel the galling chains of slavery, the cruelty and barbarism arising from it, than I ever have since" (Watson 6). Heather Andrea Williams also points out the severity of children being separated from their family, and claims in her book that "What amounted to a business transaction for owners could be a traumatic and defining experience in an enslaved child's life" (Williams 23). This is particularly true for Watson, as he firmly declares this was essentially the worst consequence he suffered from while a slave, especially because he had no means of ever finding her again. Watson also mentions that "This cruel separation brought on a fit of sickness, from which they did not think I would recover." Losing his mother and having no information about where she went, not even the chance to say goodbye, effected Watson so much that he actually fell seriously ill because of it. The incredibly strong vocabulary that Watson packs into this section vividly depicts the pain he

felt. Watson states that he made it his goal to eventually locate the whereabouts of his mother, but this search ultimately was unsuccessful, and he never sees or hears of her again. Once a slave had been separated from his or her family, the chances of ever reuniting with those family members were slim to none, as slaves were constantly being moved around and traded by their white owners. Raymond Hedin, in his article “Strategies of Form in the American Slave Narrative,” discusses this important aspect of the intention of the slave narrative to expose the cruel facts of slavery, and explains:

The disconnectedness of slave life – the jarring dislocations that resulted from the owner’s power to buy and sell at whim, the slave’s consequent inability not only to control his movements but even predict them or to keep track of separated friends and family members – was one of the cruelest and most pervasive aspects of slavery; to expose it accurately was one of the narrator’s purposes. (Hedin 29)

The instability of his life and familiar relationships as a slave are some of the cruelest details he grapples with throughout the narrative. These are precisely the moments where he gives the reader a small insight into the mental and emotional trauma he experienced as a result of this brutal aspect of slavery. While the physical atrocities that slaves suffered surely had their lasting effects, and Watson does mention the moments of physical torturing he was subjected to or was witness to in his narrative, the experiences of disconnectedness are some instances where Watson opens up the most about his suffering. These moments are precisely where Watson gets the reader to as close of an understanding of slavery as he can. For another example, speaking of the slave auction he was apart of, Watson also successfully demonstrates to his readers how inhumane the slave traders were as he describes how any married slaves were considered to be a particular risk for trying to escape and return to their wives and children. Watson writes that Denton, the slave trader, “judging from their tears that they were unwilling to go,” claimed that these men “had the devil in them” and therefore had to be handcuffed for the journey to the auction (Watson 10). This is another instance where Watson also effectively shows how the

separation of slaves from their families was one of the cruelest aspects of the institution of slavery as he recalls seeing men weeping as they were torn from their families, and then only to be punished by their tears as this indicated to the slave trader that they would try to escape.

Watson, like all slave narrative authors, had to be particularly cautious when describing the details of his painful past, as the focus of the narratives were primarily to give the facts of slavery, yet still with the end goal of persuading the reader of the horrors of slavery and encouraging them to fight against it, or at least no longer support it. Morrison discusses this issue in her speech *On the Site of Memory*, pointing out that, “But whatever the level of eloquence of the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the sordid details of their experience” (Morrison 90). Again, the function of slave narratives was not to be “creative” but factual, and therefore dwelling on details of the pain for too long, or being “too descriptive” would take away from the validity of the narrative. Watson explained the disappearance of his mother and how it affected him, but he did not linger on the subject for too long. To read slave narratives at the present then, so many years removed from the institution of slavery as it existed then, has a frustrating aspect in the experience. While we as readers want to understand what it was really like to have been a slave, to have been separated from a parent without any knowledge of where she had gone or why, one important aspect of the slave narrative is in fact revealing the impossibility of ever achieving that full understanding. This can be difficult to accept, as when we set out to read a slave narrative we are doing so to gain an understanding of slave-life. However, Watson maintains this certain distance from the reader to underscore the incomprehensibility of the institution of slavery for those who have never experienced it for themselves.

Just like Henry Watson, Sethe also was separated from her mother at as a child. While Sethe isn't permanently separated from her mother until her mother's death, she was still hardly able to ever be with her mother while she was alive. Sethe was raised primarily by a woman named Nan, another slave and friend of Sethe's mother, because her own mother was forced back to work shortly after Sethe's birth. Sethe recalls to Beloved, who had prompted the question about Sethe's mother shortly after her arrival to 124 Bluestone Road, "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo...She must of nursed me two or three weeks...then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman" (Morrison 72). Sethe's mother, within the confines of the cruel institution of slavery, was denied the right to fulfill her role as mother to her child, much like the position Sethe would find herself in years later when she became a mother herself. For example, when Sethe is sexually attacked at Sweet Home, she is more upset by the fact that the men stole the milk from her breasts that she needed to nurse her children instead of the physical abuse itself. From this remembrance that Sethe herself was nursed by another woman during infancy, it is clear that Sethe had not wanted her children to have the same detachment as she felt between herself her own mother, who was not able to nurse her, and eventually separated from her entirely. As Sethe answers Beloved's question, the early memories of her life before Sweet Home slowly emanate to the forefront of her mind. Morrison writes, "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (Morrison 73). Within this passage Sethe's repressed memories of her childhood in slavery come forth, and what Morrison highlights is that being away from her birth mother and raised by another, and being separated from her only blood-related family member at that time is extremely traumatic for Sethe, much like the similar traumatic feelings Watson experienced when he was separated from his mother. Sethe had tried

to bury her painful memories from her childhood deep within her as a mechanism for coping and moving forward in her life, but instead had become emotionally imprisoned by not reconciling these memories. Krumholz discusses this kind of painful memory retrieval and acceptance in her article and points out that *Beloved* challenges the idea that since slavery was abolished, the trauma is therefore over and no trace, emotionally or psychologically, is left behind (Krumholz 396). Clearly, all of the characters of the novel, especially Sethe, are still feeling the effects of slavery, though it has been nearly 15 years since the end of the Civil War at the beginning of the novel, the so-called end to slavery. Krumholz argues that:

Because the white people don't know "when to stop," as Baby Suggs says, slavery pushes the limits of the human capacity for suffering...But traumatic repression causes neurosis, and although Sethe's suppression of memory enables her to survive and remain sane, it also leads to a stultifying and isolated life. (Krumholz 400)

Despite Sethe no longer being enslaved, she is still suffering the effects from her past slave life long after leaving Sweet Home and living as a freed woman. The discussion around the forced separation Sethe experiences certainly works to fill in some of those gaps left from Watson's slave narrative. As both deal with separation, specifically from their mothers, Watson does not illustrate the consequences he has felt throughout his life because of this, and with Sethe, we get that exploration of how losing her mother has effected her life after slavery. As Sethe knew personally the effects of being separated from her mother had on her throughout the rest of her life, she takes immense precautions to preserve her own children from ever having the same fate.

Later on in her life, Sethe once again faces separation, and this time, from her husband Halle. As the two plan to escape to Ohio from Sweet Home, only Sethe is able to make the journey, and she must leave Halle behind. For years, Sethe has no idea what happened to Halle that caused him to be unable to escape with her to freedom. This uncertainty, like that of Watson

never knowing what came of his mother, presents a specific kind of traumatic separation.

Williams addresses this in her book, and explains that:

Psychologists call this sort of separation ambiguous loss, a loss that is uncertain, a disappearance in which those left behind or those taken away remain unaware of the whereabouts or status of loved ones. Family therapist Pauline Boss suggests that ambiguous loss, such as an accident in which a body is never recovered, may even be worse than certainty of death... This is the type of loss thousands of African Americans experienced during slavery. Often when an owner sold family members, those who remained behind had no knowledge of where the loved ones had gone and no means of making contact. (Williams 122)

So, not only did Sethe, Watson, and the majority of all slaves have to experience this forced separation, but they also had to deal with not knowing what ever happened to those lost family members. Sethe does eventually learn from Paul D that Halle appeared to have lost his sanity after seeing Sethe attacked, and this is most likely why he does not escape with her. Yet even with this little bit of information, she still has no idea if he ever escaped Sweet Home and is still alive somewhere, or if he was killed under the hand of Schoolteacher. Ultimately, the lack of any sort of real closure about the fate of her husband pains Sethe for the rest of her life.

To conclude this section, it is important to remember that Morrison was writing over 100 years after the end of slavery, and therefore able to reach some depths that authors of slave narratives simply could not because of the time in which they were writing. At the same time, even if Watson could have lingered on those “sordid details,” his audience then, and now, would still face the same limitation in trying to fully comprehend something so severe that they had never experienced themselves. Even as Morrison fills in some of those gaps left by Watson, the majority of readers still lack a complete comprehension of this kind of forced separation from their loved ones, particularly a forced separation that effected multiple generations of family members. Not only were slaves losing some family members, but possibly the only family members that they ever had, without much hope of ever being able to locate those people ever again. While both texts push the readers much closer to a full understanding of slavery by

exposing this pervasive aspect of slave life, they ultimately still define the certain extent to which the readers can achieve such an understanding.

The following section regarding Henry Watson and Sethe will focus on another highly disturbing component of slavery, which is that of the white slave owner's process of attempting to dehumanize slaves as animals.



*“I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right”*

### **As He Looks Upon His Horses: The Dehumanization of Slaves as Animals**

African and African American slaves were not only considered property that could be bartered and sold, but they also were considered less than human by white slave masters, and more akin to animals in natural qualities. In an 1854 text, *Despotism in America: An Inquiry into the Nature, Results, and Legal Basis of the Slave-Holding System in the United States*, author Richard Hildreth has entire section dedicated to exploring “The treatment of American slaves considered as animals” (Hildreth 56). He claims in this section that “The slave-master desires to look upon his slaves as he does upon his horses; to persuade himself that his empire over both is equally just; and that the claims and rights of horses and slaves, are confined within the same limits” (Hildreth 56). Perceiving the African and African American slaves as such, white slave owners felt justified then in the institution of slavery itself and the treatment and conditions that they would subject their slaves to. In Watson’s narrative, this process of dehumanization can be observed as he describes the nature of being under the possession of a slave trader until sold at auction. In *Beloved*, Morrison demonstrates this same process a little more explicitly in a particular conversation Sethe overhears about herself from Schoolteacher. Though this tremendously disturbing aspect of the consideration and treatment of slaves is touched on in both the narrative and the novel, each text also presents this dehumanization of slaves into animals carefully and specifically as distanced from the reader. In this case, neither piece lingers on the “sordid details” for too long, as a way to illustrate the reality of this particular perception of slaves, while at the same time forcing the reader to recognize the limitation to which their understanding can reach of this unsettling aspect of the black slave experience.

In the *Narrative of Henry Watson*, after being placed under the possession of a slave trader named Denton, Watson described his experience of waiting with other slaves until it was time for the auction. While detailing his own experience, he also discusses how this experience was commonly shared among most slaves who were ever sold under these circumstances.

Watson writes:

Each one of the traders has private jails, which are for the purpose of keeping slaves in; and they are generally kept by some confidential slave. Denton had one of these jails, to which I was conducted by his trusty slave; and on entering I found a great many slaves there, waiting to be sent off as soon as their numbers increased. These jails are enclosed by a wall about 16 feet high, and the yard-room is for the slaves to exercise in; and consists of but one room, in which all sexes and ages are huddled together in a mass. (Watson 9-10)

Referring to such a space as a “private jail” has the strong implication that slaves were treated as dangerous criminals, feared to be capable of anything so that this confined area was necessary for the white traders as a safety precaution. The description of the private jail owned by Denton not only reflects the sheer lack of any sort of physical freedom for the slaves, but also seems to align the slaves as being more like animals than human beings. The 16-foot enclosing walls, the yard room for exercise, and the mass of slaves being kept in this small space invokes the image of something of barn where the farm animals would be kept. The slaves were treated as though they were in fact horses or cattle or something of the sort, literally herded into a barn-like structure, forced to wait until the auction began. Hildreth, in writing on the conditions of slaves, claims that, “On the whole, it may be stated that the physical condition of the slaves throughout the southern states, is far inferior in every respect, to that of the unfortunate men, confined for the punishment of their crimes in our Northern prisons and penitentiaries” (Hildreth 59-60). Here, Hildreth compares the general conditions of slaves as being far worse than those of jails and prisons in the North. With this in mind, to then imagine the conditions of a slave-jail like the

one Watson describes, it is clear that slaves were dehumanized by their owners as lesser beings than even criminals, and particularly more like animals than humans.

Watson also recalls that this slave trader Denton would even refer to his slaves as his “flock” (Watson 10). Referring to his slaves as his “flock” not only places emphasis on the animal-like perceptions of slaves as something to be herded, but also alludes to the Christian image of the shepherd guiding his flock, thus positioning himself in quite high-esteem over his slaves. In this section, what’s interesting is that Watson does not come right out and claim something like, “We were treated like animals.” Instead, by just offering this detailed depiction of the slave jail, and recalling just a single word that the slave trader used, he is able to convey this sort of dehumanization he experienced while a slave, while confining to the standard mechanisms of sticking to the facts that slave narrative authors generally had to consent to.

To focus now on *Beloved*, Morrison more or less explicitly shows this sense of the construction by whites of African American enslaved people as animals in one small scene with Sethe and Schoolteacher. In an act of “rememory,” Sethe describes a specific incident at Sweet Home that has left a permanent impression on her mind. Sethe explains:

This is the first time I’m telling it...I couldn’t help listening to what I heard that day. He [Schoolteacher] was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, “Which one are you doing?” And one of the boys said “Sethe.” That’s when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they were doing...I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.” (Morrison 229)

The first important part of this passage that is worth mentioning is the fact that she claims this is the first time she has ever shared this experience. In an effort to protect herself and Denver, Sethe had buried painful memories like this in her being, but ultimately comes to realize that it is much more healing to share these instead of bottling them up inside her.

Of course, what follows is Sethe overhearing that Schoolteacher was instructing his

pupils to dissect her being in terms of human characteristics and animal characteristics. At first, Sethe doesn't quite understand what she had just heard, and asks Mrs. Garner to define the word characteristic. Mrs. Garner tells Sethe that it is "A thing that's natural to a thing" (Morrison 230). Therefore, Sethe then understands that characteristics are natural qualities of an object, and so her animal characteristics must be inherent in her being. Sethe struggles with this notion, as she recognizes herself to be a human and not an animal, though her white master is trying to suggest otherwise. Not only is Sethe dehumanized by Schoolteacher in this scene, but she is fragmented as a being, which is something I will explore further in an analysis of Paul D's character. This scene reflects the inner conflict that slaves would have dealt with when their perceptions of themselves as human beings was continually under the threat of confusion by the white owners as they worked to make the slaves believe that they were lesser beings by treating them as such. In a later scene, however, Sethe clarifies for the reader that she recognizes the fallacy of this accusation, though it was nonetheless traumatizing. After discovering that Beloved is actually her deceased daughter, she does everything to make up her actions to Beloved, offering all of her love and protection. Sethe tells Beloved, "And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no" (Morrison 296). Sethe was obviously profoundly impacted by overhearing Schoolteacher refer to her "animal characteristics" and would do anything to protect her daughter from ever having to go through the same dehumanizing circumstances.

To conclude this section, it is important to once again point out that both the scene from Watson's narrative and the one from *Beloved* are rather small within the context of the greater

overall texts. Yet, despite being small pieces in their stories, both scenes speak clearly to the horrific fact that white slave owners actively sought to dehumanize their slaves as being animalistic. Though both experience this aspect of slavery, they remain strong in not allowing to be persuaded by the white masters. Watson clearly maintains this as one component of the use of the slave narrative was to prove the former slave's humanity. By presenting this fact of slavery rather subtly in the narrative and the novel, the texts push the reader to recognize this consequence of the brutal treatment of slaves as animals. At the same time, however, both reveal to the reader that impossibility of a complete comprehension of slavery by maintaining subtly when describing each scenario of dehumanization. Without access to the experience itself of being dehumanized in the context of slavery, it is difficult to fully understand just how traumatic such an experience would be.

The following and final section analyzing Sethe and Henry Watson will explore the sense of freedom that each feels once they have escaped from their positions as slaves.

*“It was a kind of selfishness I knew nothing about before”*

### **Finally, Free: Interpretations of Freedom after Enslavement**

To examine a place of optimistic hope for the slave narrative and the piece of historical fiction, both Henry Watson and Sethe escape from their positions as slaves to being freed individuals, taking a huge step towards a reclamation of their selves after being enslaved for so long. Interestingly though, the definition of “true” freedom varies quite differently for Henry Watson and Sethe. Bill Lawson describes in his article “Oppression and Slavery” that “they [African Americans] understood the value of not being owned as property,” after becoming freed (Lawson 14). Of course, in the general sense, both express in their respective texts this aspect of freedom as not being under the ownership of any other human being. However, more specifically, each individual recognizes his or her sense of freedom in quite distinctive ways. Watson expresses in his narrative that he first felt the surest sense of freedom when he arrived to England, where slavery was no longer a legal institution. He primarily speaks of the general sense of freedom that most had come to associate with liberty and equality. Sethe, on the other hand, expresses her sense of freedom as having the capability to love her children and be a mother to them in the fullest extent she could imagine, which presents a far more personal sense of freedom from that of Watson’s account. Each account pushes the reader to contemplate how an experience of freedom at a later point in life after slavery differs from the majority of us who have felt freedom as something we have been entitled to since birth. Ultimately, both Watson and Sethe in their expressions of freedom maintain a certain distance from the reader as an outsider to this very experience of a transition from enslavement to freedom.

In Watson's narrative, the author expresses two different experiences of having a sense of freedom. The first encounter he has with freedom is when he secures his place on a ship that will take him to freedom in Boston, escaping from enslavement at a hotel he had been sold to. During his time at the hotel, Watson meets a Northern gentleman who helps him greatly in concocting a plan to escape to the free North, giving him every little detail to ensure his is not suspected as being a fugitive slave trying to escape. Watson describes the sensations he felt after executing this plan:

Oh! how joyful I then felt. I was lighter in body and mind, as if some crushing weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I left the ship and ran home, half crying and laughing, to think the day of my liberty was so near at hand. I reached the hotel in a state of mind impossible to describe. I however saw the necessity of suppressing my extraordinary joy, so that it would not be observed and lead to questioning me. I accordingly went to work concealing my thoughts, and looked eagerly for the day that the ship was to sail. (Watson 37)

Though Watson was not entirely free yet, just the sure prospect that he soon would reach freedom is enough to excite him, leaving him with the feeling that he was "lighter in body and mind, as if some crushing weight had been lifted from my shoulders." This sense of a "crushing weight" finally being diminished from Watson's soul speaks to the powerful nature of oppression Africans and African Americans felt while being enslaved. Lawson also claims in his article that "When, however, we examine what the slaves had to say about their own oppression in slave's narratives, ownership of human beings was identified as the mark of oppression" (Lawson 1). In Watson's narrative, it is clear that his sense of not having ownership over his own body is lessened when he secures his route to freedom. He also explains the range of emotions he felt on his way back to the hotel as he was "half crying and laughing" to be so close to escaping his enslavement. What is most interesting, however, is that he tells the reader that he was ultimately "in a state of mind impossible to describe." Once again, his narrative speaks to that impossibility of understanding just exactly how it must have felt to be slave, and to then

finally have a real end in sight of that enslavement. As Watson was writing for this white audience in order to persuade them against slavery, it seems that he recognized that they simply would not comprehend what this experience would have felt like. He begins with offering some emotions to allude to what this experience brought about in his being, but concludes with the statement that seems to be speaking directly to the reader, as if he really meant to say that he was “in a state of mind impossible to describe to *you*.”

After Watson finally reaches Boston, he hides out for three weeks to maintain some safety from slave bounty hunters who could have likely been on the lookout for him. He eventually comes into contact with the prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who advises him to seek refuge in Canada or Britain for a while, until some time has passed since his escape to ensure his total safety from being taken back to enslavement. Watson first finds work aboard a vessel in Boston in order to save up some money for his journey, and then sets out for Britain. Watson writes:

...and when I touched the soil of Britain, I felt that I was safe, --that I then was, in reality, free. On my passage out, there was a gentleman by the name of Hodges on board, who, having found that I was going to leave the ship, he hired me to travel with him. I accordingly entered into his service, and travelled over a large portion of England with him; and wherever I went, I was treated like a man. They looked at the color of my skin, but judged me from my internal qualifications. (Watson 39)

Interestingly, Watson doesn't entirely have a recognition of his true freedom and safety until he actually leaves the United States and arrives in Britain. At this time, there were still decades to come before the start of the Civil War and the emancipation of all slaves, and so the threat of being captured as a fugitive slave was still very much real. This idea of finally achieving a true sense of freedom only once he leaves the country is significant. Watson emphasizes this to his readers this distance of understanding as he puts forth the idea that he had to leave his own home country to actually encounter the reality of being truly free from slavery.



In the last lines of this passage, Watson illustrates what his consideration of freedom meant for him: being treated like a man, and nothing less, and not being immediately judged by the color of his skin, but by his “internal qualifications.” He describes his understanding of freedom in terms of sense of an equality among all peoples of all races, which is often one of the main understandings of freedom that most tend to have. He certainly seems to be conforming those slave narratives conventions of putting forth this fairly generalized sense of freedom, instead of speaking on a real individual level, other than reflecting on his restored strength in his manhood.

For Sethe, on the hand, her sense of freedom is much more specific and individual than the idea Watson presents to his readers, filling in that personal gap left by the narrative. Despite the dangerous journey, Sethe successfully escapes from Sweet Home to Ohio, delivering her daughter Denver along the way with the help of a young white girl named Amy. When Sethe arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, where Baby Suggs resides and has been watching over her other children, Howard, Bulgar, and ‘baby girl,’ who escaped first, Sethe is able to enjoy for the first time in her life what it means to be physically and emotionally free. Morrison writes, “Sethe had twenty-eight days – the travel of one whole moon – of unslaved life...Days of healing, ease and real-talk...Days of company...All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with her day” (Morrison 111). As an African-American born into slavery, Sethe never once experienced this kind of freedom, where she could spend her days in any way she like, finally being a “real” mother to her children, and not having to answer to anyone but herself. Sethe explains quite eloquently to Paul D, after he is shown the newspaper clipping of Sethe’s crime, the kind of strength she felt after accomplishing this escape:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came right off, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that.

I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good... Look like I loved em [her children] more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (Morrison 190-1)

Sethe describes here her first encounter with the feeling of having agency over her own life, or “selfishness,” as she uses the word. She was completely responsible for effectively getting her children and herself out of the hell that Sweet Home had become under Schoolteacher. The language she uses is full of pride as she claims “I did it.” Even greater than that feeling of accomplishment though, Sethe explains the pure happiness she could then feel as she was free to love her children to the farthest extent of her capabilities as now a free, or at least escaped, woman. Sethe mentions that she couldn't love her children “proper” at Sweet Home, “because they wasn't mine to love,” reflecting the lack of agency as a mother she experienced while a slave trying to protect and loved her children. Paul D recognizes what she has explained to him as well, and expresses, “He knew exactly what she meant; to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom,” (Morrison 191). Nancy Peterson highlights this idea in the novel of mothers wanting to be mothers but limited under slavery in her chapter “Re-membling Mothers and Daughters.” For Sethe, it is clear that a key aspect of her freedom is having the ability to mother her children, and the longing of black mothers to have this ability is certainly central to this novel (Peterson 31). However, under the system of slavery, mothers were not given rights as human beings, so it was nearly impossible for them to claim any rights as mothers. Peterson writes:

...schoolteacher's presence suggests the inescapability of the slave system in 1855, especially once the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 extended the reach of slavery into free states like Ohio; slavery as a system that dealt in human beings as property insists that Sethe has no rights as a mother, no claim to motherlove, because she is less than human. (Peterson 36)

Therefore, it is understandable that once Sethe escapes to Ohio with her children, and enjoys nearly a month of freedom with the ability to care for her own children, she is driven to infanticide as a means to enact her motherlove to the fullest extent when the slaveholders return and threaten her newly found freedom, and the freedom of her children.

To conclude this final section on Sethe and Henry Watson, it is quite clear to see how Morrison's text pushes the reader one step further from Watson's narrative in the sense of a deeper understanding by filling in the personal gap left out from his story. While Watson's account conforms to presenting the general sense of freedom, through Sethe's character Morrison is able to explore the more intimate understanding of what it means to be free. *Beloved* also explores this idea of what it means to be enslaved, then free, and then imminently threatened with enslavement again. While Watson surely was at risk for being captured and taken back to slavery, he is not directly threatened in the same sense that Sethe and her children are. The novel is therefore able to take this aspect of slavery one step further, reaching a more complex comprehension of the transition from slavery to freedom. However, in both texts, it is easy to see how readers can only achieve a certain understanding of this transition and realizing freedom. As an audience born into freedom, the limitations of fully grasping this knowledge of the black slave experience of escaping enslavement stands firm.

As I have finished discussing Sethe in relation to Henry Watson, I will now turn to an analysis of Paul D's character the similar experiences and representations to that of Watson. As both are male figures, I will begin with examining the ways that enslavement had effected both of their interpretations of their own sense of manhood.

*“had I not been taught that I was a slave, --that I was ever to remain a slave?”*

### **Man or Machine: The Struggle for a Sense of Manhood within Slavery**

Henry Watson and Paul D both reveal in their respective stories the powerful effects slavery had had on their perceptions of their own status as men within a society that had tried to ingrain in them that they were less than human. In Watson’s account, he describes calling his own manhood into question on the day he would be attempting his escape to freedom in the North. In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs Paul D’s character to also demonstrate how slavery instilled in the slaves themselves doubts about their own humanity, and specifically for men, their sense of manhood. Richard Hildreth argues that “The master considers his slaves as existing solely for his benefit. He has purchased, and he possesses them for his own sake, not for theirs. His sole object is to obtain the greatest possible profit out of them...The slaves are not thought of as sentient beings, but as machines to be kept in profitable operation” (Hildreth 38). This type of belief held by the white masters that slaves were merely “machines” lead to the slave’s partial internalization that they indeed existed solely for the owner’s benefit, which illustrates how Watson and Paul D experienced doubt about their own manhood and identity as human beings. While examining this particular similarity in both texts is a compelling task to further reach an understanding of slave-life, we will see that a certain limitation still exists for the readers to ever completely understand the dehumanization slaves were subject to. I will begin by looking at our historical record of Henry Watson, and then turn to our fictitious character of Paul D.

After meeting a Northern man at the hotel he was enslaved to, Watson discovers a new-found hope in being able to escape slavery and take refuge in the North. The Northerner, who remained unnamed in the text, helps Watson develop a plan for his escape by ship, providing him

with details down to the phrasing and tone he should use with the captain to execute this plan successfully. When the day arrives for Watson to escape, upon sneaking out of the hotel to the wharf, Watson was momentarily overwhelmed with self-doubt. Despite all of his excitement for at last having the opportunity to make it to freedom, the fear of failing overtakes him. The thought of the real possibility of being caught, either on the ship or once to the North, must have been incredibly powerful, for not only would he be forced to return to slave life as dictated by Fugitive Slave Laws, but he absolutely would have been punished by his owner for trying to escape. Since he already had two encounters with the law (a gambling incident and a stabbing incident), there was a real likelihood that he would have been brutally punished, or even killed for trying to escape. Therefore, Watson writes:

I started for the ship; but, as I came in sight of it, my courage forsook me. I feared that I should not be able to appear manly and fearless. Had I not been bought under the lash of the white man? had not everything of a manly nature been beaten out of me? had I not been taught that I was a slave, --that I was ever to remain a slave? that it was the wish of Almighty God that I should be content with my situation? But my readers will excuse me for deviating from my narration to excuse the cowardly feelings which then induced me to turn back. But as I did so, I paused for a moment; and the thought of freedom-- delicious freedom--came rushing over me, and filled my soul with pleasure, and I determined to persevere. (Watson 35-36).

Here, Watson reveals the critical consequence that being enslaved has had on his own self-identity as a man. He speaks of the fear that slavery has stolen his manhood, that “everything of a manly nature [had] been beaten out” of him. After years of being treated like machine existing solely for the master’s benefit, brutally punished, made to feel less than human, and taught that his lot in life was to forever be a slave, it is no wonder that Watson encountered this feeling of doubt. Hildreth’s text on slavery points out that even when slaves tried to take it upon to see themselves as men, and go against the white master’s cruel perspective, the very notion of being a man is then nearly impossible for the male slaves since the society around dictates the very opposite. Hildreth writes:

Consider the slaves as men, and the course of treatment which custom and the laws prescribe, is an artful, deliberate, and well-digested scheme to break their spirit; to deprive them of courage and of manhood. (Hildreth 63)

Trying to identify as a man while a slave would contradict everything the surrounding society was enforcing. However, it was not totally impossible to break down that barrier. For Watson, the thought of being a freed man, “the thought of delicious freedom,” returns to him, and reinvents his determination to proceed. One has to wonder whether or not this was this the hardest moment of his life; to make that decision, knowing that the consequences of failing would be so great. Watson states that, upon returning to his path to freedom after the moment of discouragement, “as it [the ship] again came to my view, I felt like a new man, and that I would attempt it if it cost me my life.” At this point for Watson, it was either escape, or die trying.

To turn now to the fictitious character of the former slave Paul D, I will argue that most crucial scene of Paul D’s struggle with his concept of his own manhood is his encounter with a rooster at Sweet Home while under the ownership of Schoolteacher. This story is first brought up by Paul D after finally telling Sethe of the tragic scene of what he had last saw of her husband Halle at Sweet Home. Sethe was shocked to hear the news that Halle had apparently lost his sanity after witnessing her being sexually attacked by the white boys at Sweet Home, and angrily questions Paul D why he didn’t reach out to Halle when he saw him in that state. Paul D then reluctantly admits to her that he could not speak because Schoolteacher had put a bit in his mouth. Sethe immediately cools her anger as she knows how having the bit used can affect a person, and invites Paul D to talk about what happened with him. He replies, “I don’t know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul... I just ain’t sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean, because it wasn’t the bit—that wasn’t it... [It was] The roosters... Walking past the roosters looking at them look at me” (Morrison 85). Even as traumatic as having the bit used on him was as if he was an animal, Paul D is actually more

affected by seeing one rooster, Mister, as he was known on the farm, as having more freedom and manhood than himself. Paul D explains to Sethe:

Comb as big as my hand and some kind of red. He sat right there on the tub looking at me. My head was full of what I'd seen of Halle a while back. I wasn't even thinking about the bit. Just Halle and before him Sixo, but when I saw Mister I knew it was me too. Not just them, me too. One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt and me licking iron with my hands crossed behind me. The last of the Sweet Home men. Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by himself but he was still king and I was...Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub. (Morrison 85-86)

The image that Paul D depicts in this moment is just incredibly powerful, and completely unsettles the reader. First, there is the reference to the comb as being large and brilliantly red, which for a rooster, is an indication of the male sex. Not only is Mister free, but his manhood is flaunted right in front of Paul D. He also references the other Sweet Home male slaves as all but being gone: "One crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt," and himself shackled up like an animal. His sense of being a man, which the previous owner Mr. Garner had referred to him as such, is shattered after Schoolteacher arrives and complicates his understanding of his own manhood. Mister watches Paul D as he is lead across the farm by the chains and the bit, and Paul D recognizes this free, male presence as being entirely superior to his own. The treatment he had been subjected to as a slave was so brutal and dehumanizing that he came to believe a small farm animal was "Better than me. Stronger, tougher." Paul D also points out that "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was...I was something else and that something was less than a chicken." In this moment, Paul D realizes that he has less rights than the rooster, a small farm animal, and it is an experience that will never leave his memory. By finally expressing to Sethe what had happened, Paul D enacts a healing process of confronting his memories as a slave, unlocking them from their

repressed state in his rusty “tobacco tin,” the symbol he uses to describe his heart. The experience of feeling less of a man than a farm animal is traumatic for Paul D and impacts him for the rest of his life. Morrison clearly uses this intense scene to push readers to try to imagine what it must have felt like to recognize an animal as having more rights and freedom than your own self.

These two particular scenes from the slave narrative and the novel considerably help the reader develop a deeper understanding for the harsh mental effects that slavery had on its male victims. The relentless degrading of slaves as machines built for the white owner’s benefit and profit reduced the sense of manhood that male slaves could feel within themselves. Of course, while their understanding of their own manhood is complicated under slavery, it was not completely eradicated, and both Henry Watson and Paul D prevail in overcoming these doubts. Hildreth writes in his text that, “But in fact, however crushed and brutified, they are still men; men whose bosoms beat with the same passions as our own; whose hearts swell with the same aspirations, --the same ardent desire to improve their condition” (Hildreth 63). These slave men were just that, men, human beings, and their innate sense of humanity ultimately conquers despite being challenged. While both of these scenes bring that deeper consideration to the reader for this consequence of slavery, they also present the notion that it is impossible for the reader to reach a complete comprehension of this dehumanizing aspect of slavery. Within Watson’s passage, as he finishes questioning his courage and manly nature, he asks his readers to excuse his deviation from the text. In this moment, he recognizes that the target white audience he was writing for simply would not fully comprehend these doubts in the ways he had experienced them, just as present day readers meet the same limitation. Paul



D's passage, on the other hand, demonstrates this limitation through his decision to specifically share this with Sethe. The only reason he feels able to share this experience with Sethe is because she had been a slave herself and could understand this part of his past. Had he been speaking with someone who had not had the slave experience, it is likely he would have kept this story repressed in his tobacco tin heart, as he had done so for so many years. As outsiders from such dehumanizing situations, the reader is thus met with this limitation in completely understanding the black slave experience.

Considering this crucial effect that slavery played in a male's perception of his own manhood, in the next section I will analyze the similar notion of the struggle to have a sense of self-worth within slavery.

*“and the traffic in human flesh began”*

### **His Price: The Value of the Self in the Context of Slavery**

Built upon the negative perceptions of manhood that Henry Watson and Paul D struggled with, the notion of their own self-worth and value as human beings is complicated as a result of their enslaved past. The Oxford English Dictionary defines self-worth as “inherent in, depending upon, or proceeding from oneself (itself), one's nature, etc.; belonging to oneself (itself) as an independent creature” (OED.com). Self-worth is thus one’s perceptions of his individual, natural capabilities as an “independent creature.” However, within the confines of the institution of slavery, a slave’s self-worth is not independently measured by his own devices, but imposed as a monetary value by the white slave owners and traders. Instead of viewing themselves as valued because of their natural qualities, they are valued because of the profit they can create for their masters. Both Watson and Paul D touch on this idea of learning of their monetary self-worth within their respective stories. In Watson’s narrative, he simply presents the reader with an anecdote of how he is purchased by a new master. His matter-of-fact tone and lack of interpretation in this scene leads to be one of his many ‘gaps’ left untouched in his story. However, this is precisely when his narrative points to that impossibility of understanding the slave experience to a full extent. On the other hand, Morrison’s details given in regards to Paul D learning his monetary worth certainly fill in some of that gap left by Watson, working to advance the reader’s comprehension of how slaves understood their value as human beings within the confines of an institution that deemed them otherwise. Ultimately, however, Paul D’s experience with learning his monetary self-worth still pushes the reader to that limitation of not being able to entirely understand slavery, despite the gaps it fills from Watson’s account.

In Henry Watson's narrative, as a fugitive slave, he had to be extremely careful in the details that he gave about his life, considering that any extra details would deter from the factual account required by his audience, specifically the white readers who he was trying to persuade against slavery. Therefore, as Watson brings up this notion of self-worth in his narrative, he leaves a gap where present day readers would hope to find insight as to how this effected his conceptual viewpoint on himself. However, in this moment, readers can precisely see how even if he had elaborated much more on this point, the outcome would still be the same: readers could never completely comprehend his explanation as outsiders from the slave experience. As readers without the knowledge of the experience of being sold for a profit, to expand would simply speak to an experience that his audience then, and now, would just not fully comprehend. In his narrative, Watson continues his story with the account of finally being sold from Denton's possession to a lawyer named Alexander McNeill, who was also a plantation owner.

Unfortunately, he turns out to be just as unkind as Denton. Watson describes first seeing McNeill, and how just in appearance he already knew he would be malicious. He writes:

...indeed, he was a very bad-looking man. I never wish to look upon his face again. His name was Alexander McNeill, a member of the firm of McNeill, Fiske & Co. He said he wanted a boy to bring up to suit himself. He took a great fancy to me, and after some discussion about the price, agreed at last to give five hundred dollars for me. I quit my old quarters, and went with my new master to his store. He told me my duty for the future would be, to wait upon him, --"to jump when I was spoken to, run when sent upon errands, and if I did not mind my P's and Q's, I should be flogged like h--l." (Watson 12-13)

Here, Watson presents the reality for slaves as being products to be bartered for and sold. He was not considered as having an independent human life, but as an object of labor who could be purchased (and of course never profiting off that money) for \$500. To offer some perspective, \$500 at this time period, roughly the year 1822, would equate to \$8979.00 in 2015 ([www.westegg.com](http://www.westegg.com)). So, instead of thinking of self-worth in terms of personal skills as a human being, the idea of self-worth imposed on slaves like Watson was how much money they could be

sold for, and how much money the labor of the slave could make for the owner. This would then have complicated the slave's own understanding of their personal value as a human when the others around them only referred to their monetary value as profitable mechanisms.

Comparatively, to now examine to our piece of historical fiction, Paul D's character also deals with how his time as a slave has effected his idea of his personal value during the present setting of the novel, several years after the emancipation of all slaves. Being a work of fiction written over one hundred years after the end of the formal institution of slavery, Morrison was able to expand on the effects that slavery had on an ex-slave's sense of self-worth without the certain limitations Henry Watson faced while writing his personal narrative. In one particularly powerful scene, Paul D revisits the memory he has of learning what his "self-worth" was as a slave. He recalls:

Shackled, walking through the perfumed things honeybees love, Paul D hears the men talking and for the first time learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make a profit on a farm—but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future. (Morrison 267)

Growing up under the "paternalistic" Mr. Garner, Paul D had come to recognize his self-worth in a truer sense of its meaning. He considered his value being that he was a hard worker, skilled in farm labor. However, under the rule of Schoolteacher, he learns his "price." Morrison frames the last sentence, "The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future," to demonstrate that his being is fragmented, so he is not seen as a complete person but one that can be broken down into worthy, or unworthy, parts. For example, "his weight" and "his strength" would be measured by the white slave owner as to what kind of labor he could perform and how much of that labor he could handle. "His future" also refers to length of time he had left to be a viable laborer as a slave. The dollar value of "his penis" referred to his abilities to reproduce, which would result in free labor for the owner. Contrarily, "his heart" could be a

factor working against his dollar value, as slaves were considered a potential problem if they had familiar or romantic ties which could make them unwilling to be separated if they were sold to other owners. "His brain" can either be observed as valuable asset or a dangerous threat. Hildreth writes that "A slave who can read is valuable on many accounts, and will sell for more money than one who cannot," but at the same time, "In most of the slave holding states, it is specially enacted that no slave shall be taught to read" (Hildreth 64, 65). While in some cases having the ability to read is considered profitable, it more likely to be considered dangerous. Therefore, not only is Paul D's previous assumption about his self-worth completely complicated, he also learns that what he assumed about himself being an individual could be broken down into separate parts. Paul D continues his memory, recalling what Schoolteacher had said about selling him:

He [Schoolteacher] would have to trade this here one [Paul D] for \$900 if he could get it, and set out to secure the breeding one, her foal and the other one, if he found him. With the money from "this here one" he could get two young ones, twelve or fifteen years old. And maybe with the breeding one, her three pickaninnies and whatever the foal might be, he and his nephews would have seven niggers and Sweet Home would be worth the trouble it was causing him. (Morrison 267)

Interestingly, this passage is quite similar to the matter-of-fact tone taken in Watson's passage describing his encounter of being sold and learning his "price." Schoolteacher apparently wanted to sell Paul D in order to purchase two younger male slaves that would have a longer working future at Sweet Home than Paul D. He refers to Sethe, presumably before her escape, as the "breeding one," still being valuable because she had already produced four children that would be free labor for him. It is clear within this passage how slaves were not seen as equal human counterparts to the whites. If there was no context to this passage, "this here one," "her foal" and "the breeding one" would seem to indicate animals, and not people, returning back to the idea of the process of dehumanizing slaves as animals. For Paul D to hear himself referred to as "this here one,"

and learning his monetary value of \$900, his sense of having a self-worth based on his natural individuality as a human is basically lost, and it is clear that this experience has a profound impact on the ways he continued to interpret himself even after being free from slavery.

Within both texts, Henry Watson and Paul D reflect the sense of having a self-worth and individual value being convoluted while enslaved. As persons deemed valuable in the monetary sense by their white masters, slaves like these two men struggled to understand themselves as having value outside the institution of slavery, when they were continually judged by the profit they could bring to their owners. Considering this result of being enslaved with that of the effects the system had on a sense of male slave's manhood, attaining any sort of self-esteem was true challenge, ingrained to be a struggle even after being freed. For present-day readers, it is thus difficult to understand the experience of learning your "price" as it is an experience unknown, nearly unimaginable. How can the present day reader truly understand the consequences of knowing that you can be bartered for and sold at the whim of another, only being valued in monetary terms? Watson's account of learning his worth as well as Paul D's similar recalled memory expose this particularly traumatic consequence of slavery, while at the same time establishing the limitation that the reader can only comprehend this experience to a defined extent. As Morrison fills some of the gaps left out in Watson's depiction, the reader is ultimately faced with the notion that there exists an impossibility of completely knowing the black slave experience in the context of trying to understand what it must have been like to be confronted with the idea that the only perception of self-worth being in terms of money.

Continuing with another complicated aspect of the system of slavery, the following section will thus explore the notion of the kind, paternal slave holder presented in Watson's narrative and Paul D's understanding of Mr. Garner.

*“What would he have been anyway—before Sweet Home—without Garner?”*

### **The Paternal Slave Owner: Fact or Fantasy?**

In contrast to the many accounts of the horribly brutal actions of masters towards their slaves, there also exists the concept of the paternal slave owner who looked kindly after his slaves, like that of Mr. Garner at Sweet Home, and one of Henry Watson’s masters, William McNeill. Both the novel and the narrative discuss the idea of the “kind” slave owner and reflect on the notion of paternalism within slavery. This idea is particularly complicated as it difficult to perceive a slave owner being any sort of a kind person, as he was in fact in possession of other humans for the sole purpose of exploiting their labor for his own profit. However, in one instance in Watson’s narrative, he described being excited to be in possession of this new master as he seemed so benevolent. Similarly, Paul D always saw Mr. Garner as being a generous master. He even adopted Garner’s last name, and keeps the last name even after becoming a freed man, as we see that when Paul D first arrives to 124, he introduces himself as Paul D Garner (Morrison 13). Although, it is interesting that in both the narrative and the novel, Henry Watson and Paul D eventually come to realize that their perceptions of this paternal, kind master were actually not as simple as they had originally imagined. In Watson’s case, his master eventually submits to the cruel standard that his mistress employed on the slaves, and becomes a passive tyrant himself. For Paul D, by reflecting on his past with Mr. Garner at Sweet Home, he comes to understand the real power Mr. Garner had over his life and the other lives of the Sweet Home slaves. Examining this complicated idea in both texts serves to purely be a compelling avenue to bring readers closer to that more complex understanding of slavery.



Ironically, Watson's encounter with a seemingly paternal master is brought about because he is sold to this man who is the brother of his former master, Alexander McNeill, who Watson describes as extremely cruel, and that he never wished "to look upon his face again," (Watson 12). However, upon meeting William McNeill, Watson immediately recognizes that this new master was not nearly as cruel as his brother Alexander. He happily left with William McNeill, entering into his new duties "with pleasure" (Watson 21). Watson embarks on a journey all around the South with his new owner, though he never specifies exactly the reasons for their significant traveling. They trek through Louisiana, Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, and Lexington, Kentucky, and then finally return back to Mississippi, where Watson learned that McNeill had just bought a plantation about 200 miles away from his brother's, and was in need of slaves to work his new farm. McNeill enlisted Watson as a sort of "slave recruiter," and gave him particular instructions that caused him to stand out from the previous vicious owners Watson had had. Watson writes:

...he instructed me to tell all slaves who should inquire of me if he was a good master, that he was, to which I readily assented; and, he did not wish to purchase any that were not willing to go with him, he would frequently send them to me, and I gave them satisfactory proofs of his kindness. He soon got a sufficient number, and started for the Mississippi by land. They all started willingly on their journey, and arrived at its end without any difficulty. This to be wondered at, as none of the gang were ironed or shackled in any way. (Watson 22)

Watson thus far in his life had never seen such "kind" treatment by a white slaveholder, and is rather stunned to have the instructions to only find other slaves who would be willing to come work on the plantation. He even goes so far as to vouch for McNeill to the other slaves, claiming that he gave them "satisfactory proofs of his kindness" in order to recruit them for his ownership. Watson was then even more stunned to find that none of the slaves were to be chained on the journey to the plantation. This moment is compelling as it shows the reality that most slave owners were in fact extremely cruel, as Watson was accustomed to being treated like a

dangerous animal or criminal that needed to be restrained by chains, so he was then shocked when this new master trusted his slaves to follow his command. Watson attributes McNeill's kind attitude to the fact that he spent so much time in the North, completing his education in New York, and was "unused to such cruelty," even keeping his promise to Watson to keep him out of the fields while at his plantation (Watson 23, 25). However, McNeill's kindness does not last long, and Watson's perception of him as this paternal figure is eventually diminished.

Though McNeill himself abstains from abusing Watson, he does not object to the horrible attacks his wife commits on Watson and his other slaves, as Mrs. McNeill apparently did not have the same Northern experiences as her husband. In fact, she had grown up in Louisiana, and Watson writes that she "had witnessed punishment all her life, and had become hardened to it" (Watson 23). Watson was once again working as a house servant, and soon learned the evil ways of Mrs. McNeill. He writes:

Her first act was to procure a cowhide, which was kept near for immediate use; and there was scarcely a day but some one of us felt it administered by her own hand upon our backs. I have seen her beat the old cook most shockingly; at one time she pushed her into the fire, and burnt her head very badly. This was the kindness to the person who had nursed her. Although I have seen her perpetrate some of the most cruel acts that a human being could, yet I never saw her in a passion when she was inflicting punishment. She seemed to take delight in torturing, -- in fact, she made it a pastime; she inspired every one about her with terror. As for myself, I was perfectly terrified when she approached. (Watson 23)

Thus far in his narrative, Watson had only discussed the violence carried out by male slave owners, but his example of the type of treatment he was subjected to by Mrs. McNeill demonstrated the brutal violence could be carried out by anyone, male or female. In fact, Watson develops a real fear of Mrs. McNeill, and even claims "I never saw, and never expect to see another person that I feared so much as I did that woman" (Watson 23-24). He also demonstrates in this passage that slaves of any age could be subjected to physical harm, as he remarks that Mrs. McNeill would "beat the old cook most shockingly; at one time she pushed her into the fire, and burnt her head badly. This was the kindness to the person who had nursed her." It is difficult

to imagine this sort of sadistic brutality, but as Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. discusses this in his article, “Politics and Political Philosophy in the Slave Narrative,” this was truly common place for slave holders as many other slave narratives discussed similar occurrences. He writes:

...they [slave narratives] portrayed slaveholding men and women as people driven by passion, whose exercise of brutal authority was not only arbitrary but also unrestrained...such slaveholder violence often slipped over into sadism: ingenious, gratuitous, even inflicted for pleasure. (Bruce 38-9)

Mrs. McNeill clearly fell into the category of the sadistic slaveholder who took great pleasure in torturing her slaves, and her cruelty had a profound impact on Watson. Luckily for Watson, William McNeill decided after a year that he needed another field hand instead of a house servant, and sent Watson to Vicksburg, back to where he was born, to find himself a new owner (Watson 25). Upon officially leaving the ownership of the McNeill’s, Watson writes, “Thus ended my services with one of the worst masters on the Mississippi” (Watson 25). Watson had met William McNeill with the great hope that he would be a benevolent master and being a slave to him would essentially be the best of a bad situation. This paternalistic relationship to his slaves ends up being completely false as McNeill allows his wife to carry out the violence towards the slaves, and ends up being not so kind after all. Ultimately, a paternalistic relationship between slave owner and slave is a romantic idealization as the reality prevailed that the relationship was built on inequality and subordination and the exploitation of the slave’s labor.

Switching focus now to *Beloved*, it is clear that Paul D had a complex relationship with Mr. Garner and Sweet Home. Morrison carefully depicts Sweet Home as a complicated space, because while Mr. Garner was indeed in possession of slaves, his treatment of them was comparably humane compared to when Schoolteacher took over the farm. The complicated notion of Mr. Garner as the “kind” slave owner is reflective of this idea of paternalism in master-slave relations. Eugene D. Genovese discusses paternalism in his book *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The*

*World the Slaves Made*, and points out that “masters and slaves, whites and blacks, lived as well as worked together. The existence of the community required that all find some measure of self-interest and self-respect” (Genovese 6). Mr. Garner ran his small farm seemingly with a certain amount of respect for his slaves, and in return his slaves respected him. He referred to his male slaves as men, claiming, “Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men everyone” (Morrison 12). Nonetheless, Mr. Garner was perpetuating the intolerable system of slavery, and in fact, as Paul D points out later on “Everything rested on him being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain’t that slavery or what is it?” (Morrison 259). This insight reflects on just how greatly slaves were made dependent on their white masters as the institution itself forced the slaves to rely on their masters, just as the slaves at Sweet Home had come to rely on Mr. Garner. As Paul D spends time reflecting on the actual nature of his relationship to Mr. Garner, he realizes that Mr. Garner did not afford him as much agency over himself as he had originally thought, and in general was not the idealized master he had always imagined him to be. Paul D expresses that:

For years, Paul D believed schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men. And it was that that made them run off. Now, plagued with the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much of a difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?...Oh he did manly things, but was that Garner’s gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway—before Sweet Home—without Garner? (Morrison 260)

In this moment, Paul D entirely questions the true nature of how Garner treated his slaves. He even goes so far to suggest that Garner wasn’t all that different from Schoolteacher. Though Schoolteacher was much more directly brutal towards Paul D and the other slaves at Sweet Home, he and Garner shared the same amount of authority over their lives. Both owners created a space that forced the slaves to be entirely dependent on them. Once again, Paul D also comes back to questioning his manhood, wondering if the original sense of his manhood was a “gift”

from Garner, imposing a sense of manhood on what was possibly not really there in the first place.

For both Henry Watson and Paul D, the idea of having a paternal, kind slave master is eradicated by the realization that this really cannot exist in a system that perpetuates the ownership over other human lives. Bruce also points this out in his article, stating that, “Emphasizing the centrality of violence to slavery as a social form and a labor system, the slave narratives unmasked the idyllic South of slavery’s defenders, demonstrating that patriarchal images were slaveholder fantasy” (Bruce 33). Proponents of slavery used the paternal image of the master as a way to justify the institution, and even slaves themselves sometimes idealized the relationships they had with their owners. Ultimately, however, as Bruce points out, this is merely fantasy. The slave owner is just that, an owner of African and African American slaves, of human lives, and there is no justification for imposing that sort of subordination on an entire race of people. Howard McGary specifically discusses this in his article, “Paternalism and Slavery,” and claims that, “In my view, paternalistic accounts of slavery cannot withstand scrutiny,” and he is absolutely correct (McGary 16). Paul D and Henry Watson first imagine to have relationships with such “paternal” masters, but ultimately come to question these, and realize that these are entirely false and merely idealizations. Therefore, these two accounts push the readers to a more comprehensive understanding in the terms of just how complex master and slave relations could be, especially when authority was confused with kindness.

In the following section, which is the last look at Henry Watson in comparison with Paul D, I will explore the importance both men express in their respective stories of establishing loving partnerships with women who are also former slaves.

“We need some kind of tomorrow”

### **Love: Moving Forward After Enslavement**

By the conclusions of both the *Narrative of Henry Watson*, and *Beloved*, Watson and Paul D express the necessity of having an intimate, loving relationship with someone who can help each other move forward after a life as a slave. In order to work through the painful memories of slavery still fresh in their minds, establishing a partnership with another former slave was an important healing effort for both men. Watson eventually marries a former slave after his escape to freedom, and Paul D returns to Sethe for good as he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. The specificity of needing someone who had been through many of the same experiences, who had known what it was like to be a slave, is particularly relevant. Both texts make it very clear that just being free could not erase the past horrors of being enslaved, and those memories would be permanent in their minds for the rest of their lives, proving to be a challenge to work through everyday. However, by establishing a relationship with another who had been through many of the same terrible circumstances, a former slave could continue his or her life much more successfully with someone who could completely understand their past. Just as the impossibility of completely understanding slavery exists for modern day readers who have never experienced slavery for ourselves, for a former slave to engage to in a loving, romantic relationship with a person who had not been a slave would present certain challenges as this partner would not completely understand the traumatic experiences the former slave had to deal with. This final expression once again points to the impossibility for outsiders to have a full comprehension of slavery through the lens of its victims by demonstrating the importance of having a loving partnership with another former slave as a support mechanism.

Within the final pages of his narrative, Watson offers a brief account of his wife, who remains unnamed in the text. He provides the following details of her life, and her escape to freedom:

She was a slave, in Maryland: was born about one hundred miles from Baltimore: Her mother was liberated at the death of her master, and left five children in slavery, including my wife. Her mother [was] removed to the North, where she had six other children. She is now dead, and the family are scattered. My wife remained at her birth-place until she was old enough to be hired out, then was taken to Baltimore and put to work. There she remained until she made her escape I will not repeat, lest I should block up the way, or affect the business of the underground railroad. (Watson 40)

Watson's wife clearly shared the similar experiences not only of being a slave in general, but also that of the forceful separation from their mothers, and the dangerous journey of making an escape North. The two are connected in their common bond of understanding some of the most difficult realities of slavery, and in turn feel safe sharing those experiences with one another.

Watson goes on to describe how having his wife who also experienced slavery has helped him work through the effects slavery has had on his being. He writes:

When toil worn and care worn, when well-nigh disheartened from all this care and toil, I have invariably been sustained by the sympathy and kind words of my wife. Truly, in the language of Scripture, she is "an ever present help in time of need." When, saddened in spirit by a reflection that my brethren are still groaning in bondage, I have found--from her former situation as a slave, being equally a sufferer with myself--she could enter into my feelings and cheer me with hopes of the approaching time of their liberation. (Watson 41)

Watson describes in this passage the tremendous help his wife provided him when he was "toil worn and care worn." While Watson is addressing more of the sadness he feels as a result of knowing that so many African Americans were still enslaved at the time of his writing, he still feels "sustained by the sympathy and kind words" of his wife who intimately knew those very same feelings. Watson specifically states that "I have found--from her former situation as a slave, being equally a sufferer with myself--she could enter into my feelings," which reveals the importance he recognizes as her having the very knowledge of what he was going through as a means to sustain him and empathize

with him. The fact that he was writing this narrative specifically for a white audience as a mechanism to gain support for the abolitionist cause is important to keep in mind. He had to maintain the notion that there was still so many slaves “in bondage,” and so he frames his relationship with his wife to highlight this. However, the specific phrase he uses to describe his wife as “being equally a sufferer with myself” seems to speak loudly to the fact that she was also helpful in understanding the sufferings he was subject to while a slave. As a former slave herself, she could share the connection, the knowledge, of Watson’s past that his intended audience could not.

To look now at the work of historical fiction, following Beloved’s expulsion from 124 Bluestone Road, Paul D returns to the house to be with Sethe. When he had originally arrived at the house at the beginning of the novel, he intended to start a life with Sethe. Since they had not only both been slaves, but slaves on the farm, they share an incredibly intimate bond, and he realizes he wants to be with her for the rest of his life. He tells her, “I told you, I’m a walking man, but I been heading in this direction for seven years...when I got here and sat out on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn’t the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life” (Morrison 55). Sethe too had come to recognize the benefits of continuing her life with Paul D by her side, and thinks to herself:

To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The “better life” she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one. The fact that Paul D had come out of “that other one” into her bed was better too... (Morrison 51)

While Sethe had worked so hard to forget the past, especially for the sake of protecting Denver, she was shocked to realize that she enjoyed having Paul D with her, even though his presence could be a continual reminder of that past. Unfortunately, this progression in their relationship is put on hold when Beloved arrives, as she absorbs all of Sethe’s



attention, especially when Sethe finally realizes that Beloved must be her dead daughter, and jumps at the chance to make up to her for her actions. At the beginning of the novel, Paul D is also struggling with his sense of manhood, and while he wants to be with Sethe, he is afraid to get too close to her, as in his past life as a slave he knew the dangers of getting close to someone only to then lose them within slavery. Therefore, he is easily persuaded to leave when Beloved enters the picture.

Yet, as he grows throughout the novel, he comes to realize he needs Sethe's support just as much as she needs his. Upon seeing the state Sethe is in when he finally returns to 124 Bluestone Road, he claims "I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now" (Morrison 320). Not only does he recognize the help she needs, but he also recognizes the help that she can offer him. Paul D recalls what Sixo, a fellow slave at Sweet Home, had said to him about the slave woman he was in love with: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (Morrison 321). The idea that this woman was a "friend" of Sixo's mind reflects that understanding of the shared experience of being a slave. Sixo discusses the support she provides by having this common knowledge, and as Paul D remembers this conversation, he realizes that Sethe too is a friend of his own mind, able to understand the struggles he still faces in the aftermath of slavery. He finally admits to himself that "He wants to put his story next to hers," and tells Sethe, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322). Looking to a future with her, Paul D appreciates that he can put his story next hers because she empathizes with so much of his, just as he does of her story, and together they can have a future of

leaning on each other for support. The two are ultimately optimistic about their future together because they have each other, equally equipped with the knowledge of each other's pasts in a way that provides strength for moving forward.

To conclude this final section on Paul D and Henry Watson, it is evident that through their need to have an intimate relationship with other women who shared similar experiences as former slaves, we can see this limitation of a comprehensive understanding being maintained. The power of the common bond over having a past life in slavery enables both men to move forward in their lives, and work on healing the wounds of their enslaved past. Paul D needed Sethe because of their shared past, and Henry Watson needed his wife because of their shared past. Trying to move forward with someone who had not experienced the same sufferings would present a whole set of challenges as that person could simply not completely understand the effects that slavery had had on the other. In the same way, the reader cannot not completely understand slavery through the lens of its victims to a full extent as outsiders from the experience. The impossibility of a complete knowledge of slave-life, and post slave-life, thus once again presents itself through this need for both men in moving forward in their lives.

In the following section, I will address the relationship that *Beloved's* character has to that of the remaining historical records of the list of slaves for sale, and the bill of sale for the slave boy, and specifically how their representations differ greatly from that of Henry Watson, Sethe, and Paul D.

*“the iron circle is around our neck”*

### **Beloved and Historical Documents: The Fragments of the Untold**

Unlike the direct experiences of slavery explained in the *Narrative of Henry Watson*, and the experiences of slavery reimagined in *Beloved*, most enslaved Africans and African Americans never had the opportunity to share their life stories, and most never even escaped slavery at all. While Watson’s slave narrative and the similar experiences of Sethe and Paul D delve readers into the depths of what slave life was like, pushing up to that fine line of a complete comprehensive understanding, it is important to recognize the individuality of these stories. Watson’s narrative undoubtedly was and continues to be an important contribution to the anti-slavery genre; Morrison’s creation of Sethe and Paul D, and the traumatic experiences they endured while slaves, and the aftermath of such experiences, reach places that the previously mentioned historical narrative could not. Both texts certainly provide some substance to the other historical records that remain, where only names or few physical descriptions exist as the furthest extent of these people’s identities. Nonetheless, the *Narrative of Henry Watson* and *Beloved* are specifically unique and individualized, which separates their stories from the majority of enslaved people. Watson’s narrative in particular can be critically understood as rather unrepresentative in the sense that he successfully escaped to the North, and went on to be an active proponent of the abolitionist cause, working with the likes of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. Even though Sethe and Paul D are fictitious characters, their stories do shed significant light on the aftermath of slavery, and how one moved from slave life to free life. Ultimately, however, their stories are a creation of a reimagining of history.

Therefore, I would like to turn now to some of those leftover fragments, records that are representative of the majority of slaves, whose stories remain to this day silenced and unknown. In examining the historical records of a list of slaves for auction, and a bill of sale for a slave child, I argue that the character of *Beloved* also aligns with these people listed, who most likely never knew much of an individual self outside of slavery. *Beloved*'s individual identity is muddled as she is both the reincarnation of a murdered child and something much more [which I will explain in more detail in the following pages]. The fragmented secondary records of information we have on these people serve to speak to those stories untold, the majority of Africans and African Americans who were kept silenced within the institution of slavery. To offer a reference point, just in the state of North Carolina in the year 1860, roughly when and where these documents were created, the total number of African American slaves was 368,531 (Historical Census Browser). The total number of slave narratives ever published in book-form? A mere 204. Historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. confirms in his article "How Many Slave Narratives Were There?" that, "From the height of the slave trade to the end of the Civil War in 1865, 102 known book-length slave narratives were written, with another 102 written by former slaves after the war" (Gates). Clearly, it is quite evident that while these slave narratives are extremely valuable to the historical record, it is important to consider them in the context of just how many slaves there actually were, who didn't have the opportunity to publish their experiences. With so many experiences unspoken, the following historical documents and analysis in comparison to the character of *Beloved* undoubtedly represents yet another limitation in the complete comprehensive understanding of black perspective of slave life for modern readers.

To begin, the historical documents that I have examined held by the Special Collections department of Norlin Library at the University of Colorado-Boulder are a list of slaves that were

most likely up for auction, and a bill of sale for a young boy. The auction list appears to be dated from 1857, in Iredell County, North Carolina, and created by [Milus] Dobins, who had inherited these people from a relative. A content description given by the Rocky Mountain Online Archive provides the following details about the list:

This was found with other documents from Dobins of North Carolina and this looks like his handwriting. The other documents indicate that Dobins had an auction to sell off the property inherited from John Dobins... This inventory may have been part of the probate process or a listing for auction. (List of Slaves for Sale)

The list is composed of thirty-three named slaves, plus eighteen children that are also listed but unnamed. The list is divided into five columns: name, color (race), age, size (feet, inches), and sex (male/female). There are a total of ten males on the list, ranging in age from 12-33 years. Of these men, four are listed as “yellow,” and six as “black.” Here, the term “yellow” is most likely describing mixed race individuals, or possibly people of a Native American race. The rest of the names are female, totaling at twenty-three, and these range in age from 13-25 years. Five of the females are listed as “yellow,” and seventeen as “black.” Almost half of the female names listed include “& child,” with the youngest mother listed as being 16 years old. Since the youngest ages listed for males and females is 12 years and 13 years respectively, we can assume that the unnamed children listed are younger than this, or a female was possibly pregnant with a child at the time. The following table on the next page, Figure 1, is a reproduction of the females listed on the document. Many of the names are difficult to make out due to the old age and natural wear of the document, so I have roughly guessed at those.

Figure 1: List of Female Slaves for Sale

<b>Name</b>	<b>Color</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Size</b>
[Parks?] & child	Black	18	5'3
[Agney?] & child	Black	20	5'4
Vilett & 2 child	Black	20	5'[0]
Kitty	Black	16	5' ½
Mary & 4 child	Black	25	5'[0]
[Lara?] & 3 child	Black	30	5'4
Mary	Black	13	4'7
Nancy & 3 child	Yellow	20	5'2
Rachell	Black	13	4'[¾]
Mariah & child	Black	16	5'4
Peggy & child	Black	18	4'7 ¾
Sarah	Black	16	4'11
Pala [Paula?]	Black	13	4'7 ¾
[Manday?]	Yellow	13	4'7 ¾
Mary & child	Black	18	5'2[½]
Mary	Yellow	13	4'8
Catherine	Black	18	5'½
Milly & child	Black	18	5'1
Caroline	Yellow	17	5'2
[Moda?]	Yellow	18	5'1 ½
Phebe	Black	18	5'1 ¾
Louisa	Black	16	5'2 ¾
[Jane?]	Black	16	5'1

Looking at just a list names like this, knowing that these young women and children were enslaved, about to be put up for auction and sold at the whim of the owner, is extremely unsettling. These were real people, victims of an institution that worked diligently to dehumanize their existence and negate their rights. One particular part of this table that is striking is the fact that although unnamed, the children are listed with their mothers. This could have meant that the children were to be auctioned off with their mothers, which would have been a blessing within the otherwise bad circumstances. However, even if mothers and children were to be sold off together, the community of slaves owned by Dobins would have been destroyed. It is quite possible that some of these young women were related to one another, as sisters or cousins, or that the father of their children was one of the men also present on the list. Of course, just within

my analysis of this list, its clear how much I have speculated about who these people were and what their future might have looked like. This speaks to that very notion of their stories never being told, and an impression of their lives only being documented for a rare moment, mediated through the slave system itself as this was a list created by a white slave owner. Unlike Watson, who was able to escape to freedom and write his story to be shared with the greater public, the stories of the men, women, and children listed on this document are completely unknown. Once again, we as modern day readers are faced with the impossibility of a complete knowledge of slavery, as so many of victims of this horrendous institution were silenced by never having the opportunity to share their experiences.

The other document I have examined along with the auction list is the bill of sale. It appears to be a transaction also by [Milus] Dobins. The bill of sale is dated February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1856, and shows Dobins' purchase of a "negro boy by the name of Jasson aged nine years of age" from a William R. Campbell (Slave Bill of Sale). The bill states that Jasson was bargained and sold for a total of \$696.50. This record is also quite unsettling to engage with, as it is a testament to the ways that slaves were treated as merely property that could be bargained for. The fact that this is a young boy being sold off is also difficult to consider, as he most likely was being separated from any family he might have known. In observing an ad for a boy for sale in her book, Heather Andrea Williams writes:

Although we may never learn anymore about this specific unidentified black boy who for a fleeting moment anonymously entered the historical record, sources produced by former slaves, slaveowners, and slave traders provide a degree of access to the lives of young people who had similar experiences. (Williams 22)

Williams points out that we can try to construct what those lives might have been like from fragments like the bill of sale or the ad by looking at those stories that were recorded. I can look to Watson's narrative for his account of being sold as a young boy for \$500 to a complete

stranger in order to imagine what Jasson might have also observed of his own experience. This sort of context certainly offers some substance to the otherwise “simple” existing document of the bill of sale that merely provides the name and age of the child being sold. In one aspect, looking to other records to offer context about the fragmented records, we can get much closer to that understanding of slave-life. However, in another aspect, this is still utterly speculation, and we see once again that impossibility of a full understanding of the black slave experience.

To focus now on the character of Beloved, I will expose how her depiction in the novel reflects a similar understanding of the fragmentation slaves listed on the auction list and bill of sale. Beloved, or as she was called before her death, “baby girl,” is a victim of the traumatic effects that slavery propagated. When her mother Sethe was faced with the immediate threat of being taken back to Sweet Home with her children, she made the decision that death was a better option than slave-life, and set forth to kill all of her children, and then herself to prevent their return to enslavement. However, she was stopped after slitting the throat of her “baby girl,” the young daughter who Sethe had sent along with her older sons to freedom ahead of her own escape. It is important to first note that this “baby girl” dies nameless, as this reflects her first instance of a lack of an individual identity. The fact that “baby girl” is killed at this very young age is also essential in considering that she would not have had a total awareness of her own individual self. Within her interior monologue in the novel, which has another importance that I will discuss later, there is evidence of this lack of recognition of her own self. In the first part of the fragmented passage, Beloved claims that “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop,” and “her face is my own...” (Morrison 248). Apparently speaking of Sethe, Beloved demonstrates that she lacks an understanding of herself being a separate individual from her mother. Therefore, just as Beloved is unable to know herself as individual with an identity



separate of her mother's, these names on the list of slaves for auction and Jasson, the young slave boy purchased, also remain trapped by the identity of being slaves within these documents. The records do not reflect the slaves named, and unnamed for that matter, as individuals with an experience to share, as the only trace of their stories are left within the mediated, second-hand records of slavery. Within Watson's narrative, we can see how after escaping slavery he reclaims his individual self apart from that institution by his decision to change his name from Bill to Henry Watson once he reaches freedom. Sethe and Paul D, though definitely struggle to reclaim their identities after slavery, do reach that point of recognizing themselves as individuals with their own rights and feelings as they realize that they can deal with their past if they have each other. However, these specific records do not speak towards any future for these slaves to have such an opportunity for such a reclamation of the self. Likewise, by the end of the novel, Beloved's character still does not conclude with an understanding of her separate self. In fact, Beloved's self-identity is so muddled with Sethe's, she begins feeding off Sethe, as "The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became" (Morrison 194). Denver recognizes the ways which Beloved cannot separate herself from Sethe, and even claims at times she could not differentiate who was who (Morrison 283). Similarly, Linda Krumholz describes her final understanding of Beloved by the end of the book, and claims, "In her last moments, Beloved stands as a contradictory image, both as the African ancestor, the beautiful African mother, connecting the mothers and daughters of African descent to their pre-slavery heritage and power, and as the all-consuming devil-child" (Krumholz 401). Krumholz' analysis of Beloved as both a mother and a "all-consuming devil-child" speaks to that confusion of Beloved herself understanding her individuality as separate from Sethe, as she takes on the representation of being both mother and child. This moment, as well as Beloved's monologue, specifically the multiplicity of her

monologue, speak to another important aspect of her character's relation to those historical documents.

It is significant to note that this is the only section where *Beloved's* inner perspective is explored in the entire novel as she narrates this passage. Just to examine this section structurally, the fragmentation of her thoughts as they are completely unpunctuated reflects a similar sense of the fragmented understanding of the slave's lives listed on those documents. The lack of punctuation makes it difficult for the reader to follow the scene and grasp a comprehension of what is happening and what is being described. For example, the second paragraph in the section reads, "All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked" (Morrison 248). Morrison certainly throws the reader into confusion right from the beginning of this section, and the rest follows in the same fashion. If we interpret *Beloved* as the reincarnation of the murdered baby, then who could be the dead man on her face, and where is she crouching? It is really difficult to get a sense of what she describes by the lack of context and structure to her words. Trying to grasp a full image from this fragmented text is like trying to imagine the lives of those slaves listed for auction, and for Jasson, the little boy sold.

Looking at the section as a whole, however, the images do clarify themselves. To focus on the discernable content from this monologue, I argue that the language itself reflects that this section is not only made up of *Beloved's* interior thoughts, but multiple voices, and specifically, voices of those who endured the Middle Passage. This section is rich in imagery that suggests the scene described is on one of the ships used to transport Africans to the New World. Aboard the ships, life for the captives was unbearable, and many never even made the whole journey.

According to information compiled for PBS's "Africans in America," the captured African people were subjected to the following during the Middle Passage:

The slaves were branded with hot irons and restrained with shackles. Their "living quarters" was often a deck within the ship that had less than five feet of headroom -- and throughout a large portion of the deck, sleeping shelves cut this limited amount of headroom in half. Lack of standing headroom was the least of the slaves' problems, though. With 300 to 400 people packed in a tiny area -- an area with little ventilation and, in some cases, not even enough space to place buckets for human waste -- disease was prevalent (PBS).

Trying to imagine what this journey would have been like is awfully disturbing, and the fear that these people must have experienced while crammed onto a ship, not knowing why or where they were going must have been enormous. The following image, Figure 2, offers a visual illustration of one of the slave ships used during the Middle Passage:

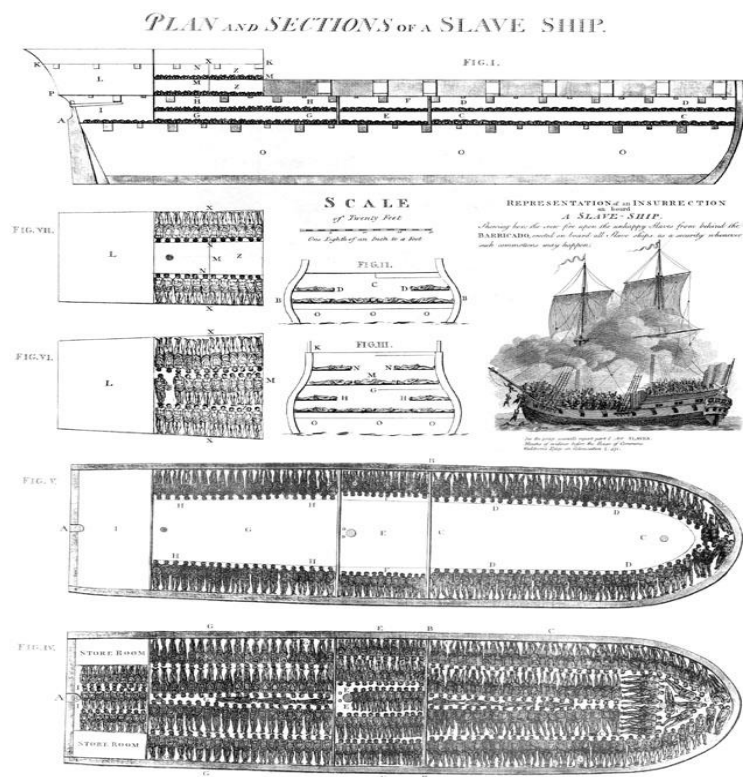


Figure 2: Plan of the British Slave Ship "Brookes," 1789 (Handler and Tuite)

This illustration helps to further depict the lack of space these kidnapped Africans had while making the long and arduous journey to the colonies. Each dark figure represents one single

person, and there are so many figures, tightly packed together, it is difficult to distinguish the separate bodies.

So, if Beloved's monologue is in fact a depiction of the Middle Passage, then it must be dependent on other voices, as Beloved was not a victim of that particular journey, given that she was born by Sethe at Sweet Home. Just the first few lines of the third paragraph in the section is especially evident of this imagery:

some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes (Morrison 248)

The first phrase, "some who eat nasty themselves," reflects the fact that the slaves were usually chained in place while on these ships, and therefore had to defecate where they laid. The image of the "dead man" above her face also indicates that they were chained down while aboard, which is also reflected in the illustration. Many of the Africans died along journey due to the horrible conditions of the ship and widespread of disease due to a lack of ventilation on ship. The description of the "men without skin" is clearly indicative of the white sailors who were transporting the African people to be sold into slavery upon reaching the States. It would seem then that the character of Beloved is in fact made up of more than the dead daughter of Sethe, and is composed of those peoples who were stolen from their homes and died during their forced journey to slavery. By intermixing this scene of the Middle Passage with Beloved's interior mind, Morrison demonstrates that Beloved is much more than one individual, but the collection of the majority of African and African American slaves who did not survive within or beyond slavery, particularly those who endured the journey of the Middle Passage. Sowande' Muskateem points out in her article, "'I Never Have Such a Sickly Ship Before': Diet, Disease, and Mortality in 18th-Century Atlantic Slaving Voyages," that, "...the 18th century saw a dramatic boom in slave sales, resulting in the transport of more than 6,130,000 Africans to the

Americas” (Muskateem). Just in the 18th century alone over six million Africans were captured and transported to be sold into slavery, and this was even the last century to allow legal slave trading. This is truly an enormous number of lives. Therefore, for Beloved’s interior monologue to be saturated with imagery of a journey during the Middle Passage aboard a slave ship, it is clear that her representation is much more than the deceased daughter of Sethe, but composed of millions of African lives stolen by the institution of slavery. Muskateem also points out in her article that, “All too often, the physical and psychological traumas captives underwent during their final moments of life remain unrecorded” (Muskateem). There were so many Africans who died during the Middle Passage, like the “dead man” Beloved describes above her face, who remain completely unknown, unnamed, silenced. Similarly, the historical records of the list of slaves for auction and the bill of sale also speak to being that representation of the majority of slaves who never had the opportunity to escape and share their stories and experiences with the nation, merely names existing on a piece of paper.

In summary, what we can learn from studying these historical records in the context of the character of Beloved is that ultimately, we can know very little in terms of the personal perspectives of the majority of African and African Americans slaves who were taken from their home land, forced into slavery in a wildly unfamiliar place, trapped for generations, and unjustly subordinated to the white population. Extrapolating the information that is provided by slave narratives and fictitious imaginings can profoundly help in trying to construct those stories untold, and it is useful to utilize the stories we do have as to better our sense of their experiences. Taking pieces from Watson’s account, like his narration of his experience being sold at an auction, and understanding it in terms of the list of slaves that had the same fate, certainly helps the reader to produce some sort of context for the names listed. However, the fact still remains

that there is so much unknown in regards to a comprehensive knowledge of the black slave experience when examining documents like the ones housed in the Special Collections department of Norlin Library. These mediated sources only reflect the identity of slave, a name and an age. They reflect real people. Yet, they do not tell the stories of what those slaves endured, what their futures held, and what their past was like. Beloved's character represents this lack of an identity outside of that of a slave, as she cannot recognize her own self without the context of her mother. She is the helpless victim of slavery in that her life was taken as a result of it, as Sethe could not let her child endure the life of slave. Yet, Beloved had no say in matter, just as the slaves listed on these documents had no say in their own fates. Beloved also represents the millions of Africans stolen from their homes and who suffered the Middle Passage, attempting to give voice to an otherwise silenced experience of those who survived the journey, and those who did not. Of course, even this attempt is met with limitations, as Morrison had created this story over one hundred of years after the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Therefore, within an analysis of Beloved's character and these historical records, it is clear that this impossibility of complete knowledge exists not only because the present day reader is so far removed in time from these experiences, but because the experiences themselves remain silenced as they were never recorded, and never shared. Their own personal perspectives linger in the past, fixed in that time and that space, inaccessible to everyone outside of that experience.

*“human life is holy, all of it”*

**Conclusion: This is a Story to Pass On**

The narrative, the novel, and the historical records undoubtedly demand that the reader come to terms with this part of America’s cruel history. Though brutal, heart-wrenching, and sickening, these texts cannot be ignored, and these texts will not let the reader ignore this past of slavery. It is difficult to accept what happened in this country, as it seems so ludicrous that the white population could have been so barbaric towards an entire race simply because they were unfamiliar and un-Westernized. At the close of the novel, *Beloved* is expelled from 124 Bluestone Road by the community of black women. Morrison writes, “They forgot her like a bad dream,” because “Remembering seemed unwise” (Morrison 323, 324). This seems to be reflective of the way that the generations since slavery have dealt with this history. It was so horrible, so inconceivable, that we don’t want to remember it, so we forget it like a “bad dream.” It happened so long ago, so how could we, a contemporary people, take any kind of responsibility for it? We cannot control the past, but we can take responsibility for knowing the past. This is what these historical documents, the narrative, and the fiction ask of the readers: to take responsibility for gaining as much knowledge and understanding of the black slave experience that is accessible. Through Watson’s slave narrative, and Morrison’s historical fiction, readers gain a certain amount of access to the individual and intimate black perspective of the slave experience. Through the historical records, readers face the names of real people once enslaved, the grotesque evidence of the claims of the narratives. At the same time, all of the texts also force the reader to recognize the impossibility of ever being able to claim a complete knowledge of this history from the perspective of its victims. Thus, this impossibility exists in

two intermingled levels. The first being that large majority of slaves, Africans and African Americans, those who survived the Middle Passage and their future generations, and those who did not survive the journey, never had the opportunity to share their life story, their experiences, and their perspectives, represents this impossibility of having the knowledge of something completely untold. The second impossibility exists as even what records and re-creations we do have, the fact that the black slave experience was so unique, isolated, unspeakable, and inconceivable, that the present day reader must be inherently distanced from it. To claim a complete understanding of that experience would be to belittle and disrespect the singularity of such a horrific experience.

Before preceding with this conclusion, one important item must be discussed.

Throughout this analysis, I have specifically examined textual evidence and accounts that speak of the black slave experience. It is entirely worth considering that this is not the only method available in attempting to gain access to this history. Specifically, slave songs are another extremely valuable avenue to pursue in investigating the slave experience besides narratives and records. The oral tradition is exceptionally unique of the African American culture, and its roots can be traced back to the period of slavery. In Lauri Ramey's book, *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry*, she points out that not only are slave songs the foundations to what future generations of African Americans would create of gospel, jazz, and the blues, but they also reflect the ways that the black slaves adopted Christianity as a form of aid in their perseverance of making the best life they could while enslaved (Ramey xiv). She writes that "Considered as lyric poetry, slave songs are a record of the slave poets' ability to overcome adversity and illuminate the strength of slave society in achieving unprecedented cultural production under circumstances of dire repression" (Ramey xviii). In the same fashion that slave



narratives were produced in part to reveal the humanity of the African American, slave songs present the same notion of demonstrating the ability to produce something culturally valuable and beautiful that also showed the determination of the black slave community to survive.

DoVeanna S. Fulton Minor and Reginald H. Pitts argue of slave songs in the introduction to their book *Speaking Lives, Authoring Texts: Three African American's Oral Slave Narratives*, that:

...African Americas protested injustice and created a record of the “peculiar institution” that contradicted the master narrative of benign slavery with slaves who were both intellectually inferior and unable to adopt the behaviors and values of Western civilization. The musical form of this oral discourse, seen chiefly in Spirituals and work songs, grew out of the slave experience of pain and struggle. (Fulton Minor and Pitts 5)

These songs therefore also offer another medium of personal expression in regards to the black slaves' sufferings other than written word, especially considering that most slaves were kept illiterate by their white owners. Even within Morrison's novel there are several references to the power of song for many of the characters, and she includes lyrics to some in her text. Thinking back to when Paul D finally tells Sethe about his dehumanizing experience with the bit and the rooster, he first admits that he had sang about it, but never talked about it (Morrison 85). Peter Capuano discusses the power of song for the characters of *Beloved* in his article, “Truth in Timbre: Morrison's Extension of Slave Narrative Song in ‘Beloved,’” and claims that Morrison uses song as a way to affirm a slave's identity as a human (Capuano 96). He argues that:

Often in *Beloved*, when characters cannot read or write or even talk about their experience as slaves, they sing to affirm their participation in life and defend their status as human beings. Song offers slaves the opportunity to express their personal testimonies while remaining within the larger cultural experiences. (Capuano 96)

Examining slave songs is thus another profound way to gain access to this history, as these songs gave “the opportunity to express their personal testimonies” and share their experiences while enslaved, particularly for those slaves who were illiterate, or who didn't know how to frame their experiences within a narrative structure. While I have focused in my project just on the textual and narrative form, I do not intend to discredit

the power that the oral tradition possesses in offering other opportunities of pursuing an understanding of the black slave experience. Slave songs are just as valuable to study in trying to gain to this history, and it would be a mistake to not acknowledge their significance when speaking of the black slave experience.

Returning back to my textual analysis, by examining Denver's struggle through the novel to access her own mother's past as slave as a parallel experience to that of the reader trying to gain full access to the knowledge of the slave experience, it is evident when limitations to this access arise. Denver desperately wants to know the past, as it is an enormous part of her own heritage, and yet can only ever understand so much of the stories she is told from her mother, and from her grandmother. Laurajane Smith defines heritage in her book, *Uses of Heritage*, that, "Heritage is a multilayered performance – be this a performance of visiting, managing, interpretation or conservation – that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present" (Smith 3). Denver desires this understanding of the past as a way to construct for her own self this sense of belonging, and to also deal with the present life she is living. She can try to re-create the events of the past in her head, but ultimately she is separate from them, and cannot fully access these experiences, because they are so singular, despite her closeness in time to them. Once Denver moves forward from her frustrations of only being able to access to a degree of her mother's slave experiences, and accepts that she can only understand so much, she is able re-emerge into the community, finding work and receiving an education, with new prospects for her own future. Similarly, the reader must accept when limitations arise in trying to achieve a comprehensive knowledge of the black slave experience as a method of respect for those who suffered, endured, and persevered throughout one of the cruelest systems in American history.

Considering the figures of Henry Watson, Sethe, and Paul D, one of which was actually a former slave, and the others were fictitious former slaves, it is evident to see the instances of their similar experiences that define the line of the reader's limitation of completely understanding those experiences. Their stories push the reader to a more multifaceted comprehension and appreciation for what the black slave experience meant, while maintaining the boundaries for where such comprehensions could extend to. For Sethe and Watson, the experience of forced separation from family members, particularly their mothers, and the experience of being dehumanized to the level of animal, are some of the most pervasive aspects of their entire slave experiences. In moments of Watson's narrative that are left mentioned, but not interpreted, Sethe's character fills in those missing gaps, offering the more intimate details, particularly in regards to the aftermath of slavery, and the effects on her emotional and mental capacities. As they reflect on the meaning of freedom, Sethe pushes Watson's generic understanding of freedom to reveal her own personal interpretation of the idea. For Paul D and Watson, as both are male figures, they reveal the consequences that a life enslaved has had on their sense of manhood, and on their sense of self-worth. Under the weight of dehumanization, they struggle to claim their male identities. Despite the challenge, however, they both prevail over the pressures of the societal dictations and reach internally for a restoration of their sense of their own humanity and self-confidence. They both expose the fantasy of the paternal slave owner, and come to terms with the notion that a kind slave owner is inherently a contradiction in terms, and cannot truly exist. By the conclusions of their narratives, they discover the value of having a partner who went through the same experiences as a medium for healing, and moving forward after slavery.

In contrast to the intimacy and personal perspectives that Sethe, Paul D, and Henry Watson offer in their respective narratives, the historical records of the list of slaves for sale and the bill of sale for the slave boy, along with the character of Beloved, reflect the many stories and experiences untold by victims of slavery. They are representative of the vast majority of Africans and African Americans who not only never escaped slavery, but also never claimed much of an identity outside of slavery, fixed in time under the slave status. These people never had the opportunity to publicly share their experiences in a way that could remain documented for years to come, thus demonstrating the impossibility of a knowledge of their experiences as they were never even recorded. Studying the list of slaves and the bill of sale is undoubtedly an unsettling experience, one which puts the realization of the tremendous amount of those lost stories into perspective. While trying to reconstruct their histories from other accounts that do exist can be useful, ultimately those experiences are still unknown. Through Morrison's construction of Beloved, it is clear that this character stands as a representation for those lost experiences as she is both the manifestation of Sethe's dead daughter, as well as the voice of the millions of Africans who endured the Middle Passage. Beloved's inability to separate her individual identity from Sethe's reflects the ways that the names on the list of slaves remain imprisoned on the documents within a slave identity. Throughout her monologue, she describes images from an experience on a slave ship from Africa, and therefore reveals that not only does she struggle with her identity as Sethe's deceased daughter, but an identity which is representative of all of the lives of Africans who were kidnapped from their homes and forced into slavery. In the same way that the list of slaves and the bill of sale serve as representations of the larger unknown slave experience, Beloved's multiple identities offer the representation of those first Africans that were ever brought to the states, both those who survived the journey and those who did not.

In closing, it is thus evident that limitations firmly exist for the present day readers attempting to gain a complete, comprehensive understanding of the black slave experience. Due to the distance in time from the era of slavery, the lack of recorded experiences, and overall uniqueness and singularity of such an experience of being under the complete control and ownership of another human being, there is certain extent to which we can comprehend the lives that endured one of the most horrifying institutions in American history. Morrison writes at the close of her novel, “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324). However, after the experience the reader has just had with the text, she actually seems to be commanding the very opposite of her readers. The story of slavery, and the lives it has tremendously effected in her novel positively demand that this story be passed on. Gordon also makes a similar claim that “Morrison’s call for accountability suggests that it is our responsibility to recognize where we are in this story, even if we do not want to be there” (Gordon 188). Despite the difficulty to fully understand the black slave experience, it is critical to make that attempt, and to take accountability and responsibility for the most knowledge available of such an experience. Watson’s narrative, being written during the era of slavery for the purpose of its abolition, demands the truths of the institution be known, and not forgotten. The history of slavery is brutally disturbing, and trying to fully understand the black slave experience is simply impossible, but these are not excuses for ignoring this part of America’s dark past. The quote from the former University of Colorado-Boulder president George Norlin engraved on front of Norlin Library, where original copies of the slave narrative and the slave records are maintained, states, “Who only knows his generation remains a child” (cuheritage.org). Gaining the most comprehensive idea of what slavery did and meant to its victims is a responsibility for everyone in this country. While there may be nothing anyone can do to change the past of slavery,

understanding as much of that past as possible is critical in order to comprehend the state of the present. Synthesizing historical fiction with historical documents not only demonstrates the limitations in a complete knowledge of the black slave experience, but represents those limitations as something to be respected in considering the incredible circumstances Africans and African Americans were subjected to. Throughout all of the tremendous suffering that these people endured, they also persevered in trying to make the most out of the lives that they had. By establishing loving relationships, family and community bonds, forming cultural traditions, and doing everything in their power to better the future for their children and generations to come, black slaves carried on despite astonishing odds. Recognition and knowledge of this past offers an understanding of the way that the African American culture has continued to be shaped since slavery, as well as for the present state of race relations in America. This is a history that is equally important for future generations to be aware of, and it can no longer continue to be glossed over in history books and classrooms. Responsibility for knowledge of this history must be taken, and when knowledge of the black slave experience meets limitations, those experiences must be respected.

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