

Chapter Five

Flowers in the Dark:

African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Anything that's paradoxical has to have some humor in it or it'll crack you up. You know that? You put hot water in a cold glass, it'll crack. Because it's a contrast, a paradox. And America is such a paradoxical society, hypocritically paradoxical, that if you don't have some humor, you'll crack up....You have to laugh at it.

--Malcolm X, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*¹

Other people call it humor. It's not really that. It's not sort of laughing away one's troubles...Laughter itself for Black people has nothing to do with what's funny at all.

--Toni Morrison, interview

Dancing around the room with Sethe's apron, Beloved wants to know if there are flowers in the dark. Denver adds to the stovefire and assures her that there are.

--Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel set during the American slave era, presents the story of Sethe, an African American slave woman who murders her own daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Conjoining 'laughter' and 'slavery,' like combining 'laughter' and the 'Holocaust,' makes us react viscerally with discomfort and ethical apprehension. Our culture seems to have some type of 'slavery etiquette' comparable to Terrence Des Pres' 'Holocaust etiquette' which makes us uncomfortable to speak of laughter in conjunction with events so shameful and horrible. Nonetheless, Morrison's work unveils a profound relationship between laughter and African American consciousness. Just as Wiesel's *Gates of the Forest* occasions a reinterpretation of Jewish laughter amidst the Holocaust, Morrison's *Beloved* occasions a much needed reinterpretation of black laughter as an ethical and theological resource. As was the case for Wiesel and Endo, nearly all critics simply ignore the laughter in *Beloved's* pages. When the novel was made into a film, the filmmakers omitted all of the strange but crucial narrative moments of laughter. Why is this? Perhaps the novel's intensely tragic and disturbing subject matter causes us to shy away from the messy and seemingly

“unserious” question of the laughter in the story. Yet still we must ask, what does the laughter of the oppressed mean?

Beloved, though fiction, has a profound historical epicenter even beyond being based on the historical era of African-American slavery. The real life of Margaret Garner inspired Morrison to write *Beloved*. As the editor of *The Black Book* in the 1970’s, Morrison came across an obscure article from 1856 in the *American Baptist* entitled “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child.” In this article, Morrison discovered the following story that gave birth to her fictional character Sethe:

She [Margaret Garner] said that when the officers and slave-holders came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and she took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other—that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all—that with regard to herself, she cared but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.

I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piecemeal.²

Commenting on the article and its readers, Morrison states, “I wondered if they knew the complicated psychic power one had to exercise to resist devastation.” The article does not provide the complex context and background to Garner’s real-life tale, so Morrison, much like the midrash, reconstructs it through the fictional Sethe’s psychic struggle to cope with her murder of her own child Beloved, along with the other characters

simultaneous struggles to resist slavery and its devastating psychological, spiritual, and emotional aftermath. In the narrative, *Beloved* emerges as a composite character who represents not only Sethe's dead child but all of the deceased children of slavery who died mid-passage. Morrison, then, similar to Wiesel and Endo, writes to tell the untold stories of the marginalized that history books and the media fail to tell.

Of particular interest is the laughter of three of *Beloved*'s characters: Baby Suggs, Sixo and Paul D, all of whom struggle to endure the radically negating experience of slavery and its consequences. Laughter functions in the text as a creative, counter-hegemonic mode of ethical and theological resistance for the oppressed African American community. By engaging *Beloved* with the works of James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lawrence Levine, and others, I aim to show that laughter can function as an empowering and invaluable interruption of both the system and the state of oppression. To appropriate *Beloved*'s own metaphor quoted in this chapter's epigraph, laughter blooms within the story as an incongruous flower of resistance in the dark world of dehumanization.

Baby Suggs

We turn first to the character of Baby Suggs, an especially interesting case for our discussion of laughter. Although Baby Suggs, as spiritual leader of her community, preaches laughter as resistance for most of her life, she ultimately abandons laughter. If a collision of narratives engenders laughter, does this mean the narrative of tragedy has overwhelmed Baby Suggs? Has she let go of her narrative of faith?

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, was a slave at Sweet Home until her son, Halle, bought her freedom from the slave master by working overtime for five years of Sundays. Although Baby Suggs gained her freedom, she must leave her son behind and her life remains scarred by the irreparable wounds inflicted by slavery: "In all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (5).

In spite of this tragic existence, Baby Suggs emerges for a time as the model of resistance and spiritual leadership for her community. Those around her refer to her as Baby Suggs, holy. Rather than succumb to despair, Baby Suggs decides that:

Because slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue," she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. In winter and fall she carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctified, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. (87)

Baby Suggs therefore is rooted in the tradition of African American spirituality and takes the pulpit when called by the Spirit.

Laughter as deconstruction of the oppressive consciousness

Baby's laughter-as-resistance manifests predominantly an ethical, humanistic concern, although with subtle theological undertones. In other words, Morrison appears less concerned that Endo and Wiesel with God's silence and more preoccupied with the secular question: in light of slavery, what can be said about humanity and how we should live? Baby's laughter has the same critical purpose as African American spirituality: to deconstruct both white theology and the white hegemonic consciousness.

Baby Suggs' rootedness in African American slave religion can be discerned in two main ways: (1) her use of a worship space in the woods and (2) the fact that, as a woman, she preaches at all. First, her outdoor preaching in the Clearing has obvious roots in a slave worship tradition known as the bush arbor, a space in the woods created by slaves to be used for clandestine meetings of worship. We read, "When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer" (87). In a seminal text entitled *The Invisible Institution*, Albert Raboteau explains that although Christianity had pervaded the slave community, slaves had an extensive religious life of their own outside the institutional church, "In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the bush arbors ("hush harbors") the slaves made Christianity truly their own."³ Dissatisfied with worship in the white churches which *ad nauseam* preached subservience to slavemasters, many slaves held their own worship services outdoors in the woods or in their living space. In the words of one ex-slave, these special clandestine worship services took place "cause we wanted to serve God in our own way."⁴

Despite its pervasiveness, slave religion earned the later name the ‘invisible institution,’ both because of the slaves’ surreptitiousness and scholarship’s longstanding failure to study their practices. These secret outdoor gatherings, of which Baby Suggs’ meetings are a likely offspring, were entirely distinctive and responded to the needs of the African American community by negating white theology and revaluing black identity and being. Dwight Hopkins argues that by seizing the sacred domain of the bush arbor or prayer ground, African Americans helped sustain and constitute a distinctive identity.⁵

Upon first arriving in the north, Baby Suggs refers to her involvement with the invisible institution. Responding to Ms. Bodwin’s inquiry about her churchgoing habits, Baby’s cryptic answer suggests that although she has not set foot in a church for the ten years of her enslavement at Sweet Home, she has consistently worshiped with other African Americans in ‘some kind of way.’ She responds ambiguously, “I ain’t set foot in one [a church] in ten years. [. . .] Wasn’t none. I dislike the place I was before this last one, but I did get to church every Sunday some kind of way” (146). Baby Suggs’ comment contains the implicit critique that white churches are not authentic churches at all; when asked why she does not go to church, she replies, “Wasn’t none.” Undoubtedly churches in the south were available, but Baby Suggs’s response implies that, as white institutions tainted with racism, they did not meet her worship needs. Baby Suggs’ comment that she nonetheless worshipped ‘every Sunday some kind of way’ most likely refers to the stolen prayer meetings of slave religion.

Given Baby Suggs’ (and obviously Morrison’s) knowledge and acquaintance with slave religion, she symbolizes and embodies the mode-of-being-as resistance that

accompanied the tradition. Historically, slave prayer meetings often functioned as an occasion to plan physical liberation as well as spiritual liberation. The unique African American theology developed by the slaves was so liberating that it frequently crystallized into courageous acts of physical resistance. Nat Turner and a vast number of other African American revolutionaries, for example, led slave revolts with explicit religious validation for their uprising. Understanding full well the connection between theological liberty and acts of resistance seeking physical liberty, slaveowners passed reactionary laws, punishable by death, forbidding slaves to practice Christianity on their own.

As Dwight Hopkins and George Cummings conclude in their study of slave narratives, slave religion must be considered in and of itself a form of resistance:

Assembled deep in the woods [...] African Americans found worship space in which to thrive by maintaining morale in situations that seemed hopeless; preserving mental sanity in the face of the irrational white world [. . .] synthesizing memories of African religious structures and practices with reinterpreted Christian belief to build a unique African American theology under slavery, organizing and plotting slave political and cultural resistance.⁶

Summarizes Hopkins, “Bush arbors epitomized black hands and hearts creating space for the poor to encounter the holy [...] and not only fashion their secret and novel approach to the divinity, but also resist and reinvent themselves over against oppressive strictures.”⁷ In the sacred domain of the Clearing, the recently liberated Baby Suggs provides just such a place where the poor and black can come to collectively restore their

strength to face a world of prejudice and socio- economic oppression that persists even in the north.

Besides embodying resistance by creating a distinct religious consciousness and worship space for slaves, Baby Suggs' rootedness in slave religion can be seen in a second way. In the *Invisible Institution*, many years before most white mainline churches had ordained a single woman, a preacher was anyone, male or female, who was, as Raboteau describes, 'licensed only by the Spirit.' Morrison describes Baby as uncalled, unrobed, and unchurched. Delores Williams helps us understand that in stark contrast to the white institutional church in the antebellum period, black communities granted older women the authoritative voice for educating other slaves and children in African American Christianity, as the women were the ones who stayed behind while men worked in the fields.⁸ In the *Black Book* article on which Morrison based *Beloved*, Margaret Garner's real-life mother-in-law is a preacher, the inspiration for the character of Baby Suggs.

Laughter as grace

During Baby Suggs' meetings, then, she creates a space wherein the people can resist and reinvent themselves under her spiritual guidance. Not only does Baby incorporate into her unconventional "service" traditionally African American forms of worship such as the ring shout dance and Call and Response preaching, but also she extends to her people the unusual invitation to laugh, dance and sing in the midst of tragic suffering:

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. [. . .] Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them and groundlife shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes, the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. [...] In the silence that followed Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (87-88)

Baby Suggs, therefore, much like the rebbe and Gavriel in *Gates of the Forest*, urges the people to laugh, as well as sing and dance—all alternative modes of expression the dominant Christian theology and practice does not embrace. Yet there is a noteworthy shift of emphasis from Wiesel’s Gavriel and Endo’s Rodrigues to Morrison’s Baby Suggs: Baby’s preoccupation is not as much with the problem of evil and its relationship to God, as it is with the problem of evil and its relationship to humanity. Baby Suggs in her sermon avoids God-language, probably because of its corruption by white Christians.

In Baby's sermon, grace is apparently not divine gift, because the human imagination creates grace. Baby's personal experience transforms her religious tradition in this regard: in her understanding, liberation is ultimately a human possibility, rather than a divine one. Or better: liberation comes *both* from humanity *and* from God, because, either/or interpretations fail to describe the complexity of the divine-human interaction within the Christian faith.

Baby does, after all, inaugurate her sermon above with a prayer, yet the remainder of the address is solely to the community. Here, we are reminded of Gavriel who both hopes and cannot hope, and who comments, "Everything is true and everything is a lie; men love and kill one another; God bids them pray and yet their prayers change nothing" (9). Although the later Baby Suggs abandons even this position, the early Baby adopts an ethical position that reveals a humanistic religious dimension. In fact, at this point in the narrative, Baby might well agree with the Hasidic aphorism that a person must pray as if all depended on God and act as if all depended on humanity.

Laughter as alternative black consciousness and identity creation

Baby Suggs therefore embodies a paradox and incarnates a fractured faith, much like her fictional counterparts Gavriel and Rodrigues. Also like Gavriel and Rodrigues, the laughter Baby Suggs preaches is born from a collision of narratives. Like Rodrigues who experienced multiple simultaneous collisions of narratives, Baby Suggs' collision of narratives occurs on three different levels of experience, all of which rupture language and therefore engender laughter.

First, Baby experiences the collision of an emerging black consciousness with white consciousness and ideology. In Baby Suggs' preaching, she rejects the white consciousness, which aims to inculcate in the slaves feelings of subservience and inferiority and respect for a divinely sanctioned white dominance. White churches preached *ad nauseam* to the slaves passages such as Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, 1 Peter 2:18. All of these bible verses instruct slaves to obey their masters in all things and not to sin against them; they served therefore as the theological undergirding for white dominance. Baby Suggs, however, straightforwardly rejects the theology of these passages and their other-worldly promise of heavenly reward for subservience: "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure"(87-88). Baby Suggs realizes that to say such things would be tantamount to subscribing to a white consciousness that would foster quietism and passivity among the people, who are still struggling for physical, legal, psychological, emotional, and socio-economic liberation from slavery's oppression.

In *The Failure of White Theology*, Patrick Bascio points out that black religion is a religion of protest that functions as a critical corrective to white theology and consciousness, "Black religion began the process of decolonizing theology when it insisted that God was the freeing one who was at work in history setting the victims free."⁹ Baby Suggs with her laughter, dance and speech wants to decolonize white consciousness and theology and replace it with an African American consciousness of liberation, self-valuation, and resistance. Deborah McDowell notes that African American laughter often can be 'law-breaking' and 'truth-breaking,' and an expression of

what Bergson terms ‘topsy-turvydom.’ In lieu of quietism, Baby hopes to incite protest. Her message unveils a theology of protest. To quote Hopkins and Cummings, “The slaves constantly had to struggle with unraveling the false theological consciousness existentially imposed by white definition.”¹⁰ Baby Suggs’ preaching is a conscious and deliberate attempt at this unraveling. Her laughter is a conduit of protest essential to this end.

Baby Suggs’ ‘preaching’ and laughter, then, manifest a decolonized version of white theological anthropology, a new vision of who African Americans are and their created purpose. Baby Suggs attempts to convince her people that African Americans are not worthless, unintelligent, and subhuman as those within the corridors of power have tried desperately to make them believe. States Cone, “Black consciousness is an attempt to recover a past deliberately destroyed by slave masters. [. . .] There is only one course of action for the black community, and that is to destroy the oppressor’s definition of blackness.”¹¹ Schoolteacher, for example, tells his nephews to list Sethe’s “animal characteristics” on a sheet of paper, and proceeds to allow his boys to rape her. The whites in the narrative conceive of blacks as “a people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (151). Morrison adds, “White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle” (198).

In direct opposition to this white consciousness and anthropology, Baby Suggs provides the people with a new black consciousness. Through laughter and dance, she encourages the people to rediscover themselves as lovable, beautiful, and chosen. They are, she assures them, and here no doubt the novel’s title refers to the African American

people as a whole—the beloved, of one another and of God. Writes Cone, “The essence of antebellum black religion was the emphasis on the *sombodiness* of black slaves [. . .] even though they were treated as things. [. . .] To be enslaved is to be declared nobody.”¹² In contrast to white preaching, Baby Suggs’ sermons and worship in the woods affirm the somebodiness of African Americans. Her message incarnates the biblical verse Morrison chose as the novel’s epigraph, Romans 9:25: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.”

In the most important sermon in the novel, Baby Suggs’ once again urges the people to laugh as she imparts to the community a new sense of identity and self-worth, and fittingly repeats the phrase from Romans “O my people.” This sermon makes explicit Baby Suggs’ effort to unravel the false theological consciousness and false anthropology of white ideology, as well as to replace it with a black understanding of the self as lovable, valuable, and self-determined:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. [. . .] And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight.

So love your neck; put a hand on it, race it, stroke it and hold it up. [. . .] More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. (88-89)

Here, as in Wiesel and Endo, Morrison’s novel suggests that African Americans too experience a linguistic rupture, for all they have suffered cannot ever be fully said. No white person can ever fully understand the pain of the experience of slavery. Thus, Baby Suggs laughs and dances ‘with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say.’ Racism and oppression so distort language that they rupture it and render it incapable of expressing the African American condition of suffering and protest. In the face of this crisis of representation, laughter helps deconstruct white racist thinking, in Hill Collins’ sense of deconstruction: exposing a concept as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as a natural or simple reflection of reality.

Baby Suggs’ laughter juxtaposes the white hegemonic narrative with the black-consciousness narrative, and forces the former to encounter the latter. This juxtaposition has the effect of rupturing a simple hegemony. In so doing, Baby Suggs exposes white hegemony and white theology as empty ideology fueled by insecurity and hatred. With this incitation to laughter and love, Baby Suggs imparts to her people a radically new self-consciousness and form of resistance. Kelly Brown Douglas reminds us that slavery was part of a greater ideological structure, which presupposed both hierarchical relationships between human beings and the inferiority of people of color. The dominant

culture taught African Americans self-hate, low self-esteem, subservience, and submissive acceptance of an unchangeable inferiority.

Moreover, white society hoped that African Americans would internalize this valuation of themselves and thereby accept subservience as manifest destiny. Cone argues that white people did everything in their power to define black reality as servanthood and black existence as ‘non-being.’¹³ The prevailing definition of black as non-being and worthy of death is the thrust behind Baby Suggs’ assertion, “They do not love your neck unnoosed.” However, Baby Suggs shatters precisely this false ethical consciousness of the white oppressive system. She effectively deconstructs such an understanding of blackness by exposing it as externally imposed, entirely ungentle, and therefore absurdly laughable.

In its humanistic assertion of a radically autonomous will that can kill the beast of tradition and supposedly authoritative voices, Baby’s laughter in this ‘sermon’ evokes comparison to that of Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. Zarathustra states, “Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter.”¹⁴ Although Baby would reject Zarathustra’s nihilism, and radical relativism and individualism, we can certainly imagine her saying along with him, “Verily, you who are good and just, there is much about you that is laughable, and especially your fear of that which has hitherto been called devil.”¹⁵

White consciousness demonizes the black person, and Nietzsche’s use of laughter lends support for our interpretation that Baby’s laughter unmasks this consciousness of the putative ‘good and just’ as mere ideology. Moreover, Nietzsche helps us understand Baby Suggs’ laughter as annihilative. Her laughter counters the deleterious effects of tradition, and civil and religious authority. For Nietzsche as for Morrison, laughter gives

the unvoiced a voice of power, will, and self-valuation. For Morrison, however, the will-to-power embodied in laughter contains an eminent danger, as the will-to-power can lead one to become an oppressor like Schoolteacher, or to become an oppressed person like Sethe, who chooses to murder her own child. Nietzsche's own writing, for example, was used to support the Nazi will-to-power. Morrison on the other hand suggests that if the will-to-power leads one to think one can possess others, it destroys itself. Even Sethe, who sought her whole life to escape being possessed by others, frighteningly repeats to Beloved, "You are mine/You are mine/You are mine" (216).

Baby Suggs, like Zarathustra, rejects the dominant consciousness as false and misleading, fostering the slumber of the masses. All too often, Baby has heard Christianity exploited to foster inferiority and quietism—"she did not tell them they were the glorybound pure and to go and sin no more"—and so she tries to interrupt this theological anthropology. Baby Suggs encourages the people to self-love and self-affirmation, in spite of the fact that the dominant culture encourages only their self-hatred and self-negation.

Cone agrees that an authentic black consciousness insists on self-understanding and self-creation of the kind advocated by Baby Suggs: "There is only one possible authentic existence in this society, and that is to force a revolutionary confrontation with the structures of white power by saying yes to the essence of their blackness [. . .] affirming that which the oppressor regards as degrading."¹⁶ By asking the people to laugh even though their oppressors want them to weep, Baby Suggs invites them to share in this independent consciousness. Gavriel makes this very same point, "To weep is to play their game. I won't" (7). Baby Suggs, then, like Gavriel, with her laughter jettisons the

despair, tears, and self-loathing her oppressors strive relentlessly to inflict. Her laughter interrupts not only white hegemonic theology, but also both the system of oppression and the state of despair and paralysis that accompanies it.

By laughing, Baby Suggs expresses that the two opposing narratives of white and black consciousness are in conflict, creating a paradoxical both-and existence for African Americans. Where racism has become banal and accepted, no paradox or opposing narratives remains in the mind of the oppressed. With a laugh, Baby Suggs signals her non-acceptance of racism and calls attention to its absurdity. The laughter of the black oppressed interrupts the banality of the systemic evil of racism. Baby Suggs' laughter manifests an independent African American consciousness that exists in tension with the hegemonic consciousness. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, oppressive structures try to eliminate an independent consciousness precisely because it empowers the oppressed to counter hegemony: "Suppressing the knowledge produced by an oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because [of] the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed. [. . .] One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are suppressed is that self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance."¹⁷

Baby Suggs' laughter thus must be considered a highly creative ethical and theological response, a transformative mode-of-being in the world. By laughing, Baby creatively brings to consciousness a potential narrative of celebration, self-affirmation, love, hope, protest—a narrative of hope deliberately made inaccessible to African Americans by whites. Baby confronts the white voice with the heretofore silenced black voice and black laughter. Baby embodies what Kelly Brown Douglas terms a spirituality of resistance, a resistance with theological roots but imperative ethical, historical and

activist components, “A spirituality of resistance implies [. . .] that if an oppressed people have pride in their own culture and historical heritage, as well as a knowledge that they are children of God, then they will not be as vulnerable to the oppressive structures, systems, and ideologies that attempt to convince them that they are nobody and that their lives are not worth living.¹⁸ Baby urges her people to self-definition because she understands, in the words of African American poet Audre Lorde, “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment.”¹⁹

Baby’s laughter is creative because it entirely contradicts history; African Americans have been denied the very narrative Baby Suggs’ laughter suggests can be actualized. Baby’s laughter anticipates the future and is a manifestation of what Cone terms the ‘apocalyptic imagination:’ “It was a hope *against* the hopes of this world. [. . .] This transcendent element of hope [. . .] elevated black people above the limitations of the slave experience, and enabled them to view black humanity independently of their oppressors. [. . .] The strongest counterweight to the obstacles in the way of historical liberation is that vision of the future defined by the oppressed black slaves.”²⁰

Baby Suggs has faith that her people can achieve this level of self-definition and self-love, but not through mere language which cannot express the paradox of the African American dual consciousness. Instead, Baby uses laughter and song to capture the contradictions and both-and character of her experience of oppression. Cone says that black music (and we can add black laughter) “unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and despair of the black people. It is necessary to grasp the contradictions inherent in black experience. Who could possibly understand these

paradoxical affirmations but the people who live them?”²¹ In the midst of tragedy, Baby’s laughter functions to resist passivity, despair, subservience and hopelessness by its insistence on the impossible possibility of regeneration—the grace the people can imagine.

Laughter as protesting hope in the face of evil

The second collision experienced by Baby Suggs involves the collision of the narrative of faith with the narrative of negativity, as was the case for Gavriel and Rodrigues. For Baby, her narrative of human potential for love and grace collides with the narrative of white cruelty and oppression. In the background of this collision lies the familiar problem of evil and theodicy, which, as we have seen in Wiesel and Endo, ruptures language and engenders laughter. Baby herself states clearly that the horror of reality (slavery) has ruptured language for her and other African Americans, “Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She [Sethe] and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” (58). Also, at the end of Baby’s life, “Except for an occasional request for color she said practically nothing” (105). Here we see another manifestation of the crisis of representation engendered by an encounter with oppression and suffering.

Baby Suggs laughs because words cannot adequately circumscribe the ‘in-spite-of,’ ‘not-yet’ aspect of her faith and her hope, a faith in humanity that persists in the face of tragedy. Ricoeur explains, “The existential-historical condition of evil constitutes the challenge to which religion brings the reply of an “in spite of...,” an “even though...” This tie between challenge and reply is the tie of hope. [. . .] The confession of the inscrutability of evil closes the way of explanation only so as to hold open that of

regeneration.”²² Baby Suggs’ laughter manifests a hope that acknowledges its coexistence with radical evil. It responds to and challenges an evil that is inscrutable, unspeakable, and otherwise crippling. Morrison says, “Black people never annihilate evil. [. . .] They accept it. It’s almost like a fourth dimension in their lives.”²³

As is the case for Gavriel and Rodrigues, Baby’s collision of her narrative of faith and negativity involves at least in part God’s ostensible absence and lack of justice and benevolence, as revealed in the following dialogue she has with Stamp Paid:

“You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.”

“You punishing Him ain’t you.”

“Not like He punish me.” (179)

On another occasion, Stamp Paid tells us, “Her [Baby Suggs’] authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call [. . .] all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard. God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of him to say so” (177). Just as Hasidic thought cannot ever fully reconcile a just God to the *Shoah*, African American theology struggles to reconcile God’s justice with the experience of slavery. While we should never conflate the two distinct experiences of oppression, the similarities provide an interesting point of departure for dialogue across communities. The black theologian William Jones for example daringly raises the question of divine racism, asking, “Is God a white racist?”²⁴ Similarly, in *Beloved*, characters besides Baby Suggs often raise the questions of theodicy or a tragic theology: When Amy Denver asks, “Wonder what God had in mind;” Sethe, nearly dead from attempting to escape slavery, echoes, “Good question... What did He have in mind?” (80) Even more

poignantly, Paul D at one point asks, “How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. [...] Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?” (235) Morrison’s narrative leaves these questions open-ended and unanswered.

Sethe’s drastic murder shatters religious thought for many of the characters in the novel. Baby eventually abandons the question of a tragic theology and adopts a tragic anthropology instead, “[On] the afternoon of the last day of her life [. . .] she got out of bed [. . .] and announced to Sethe and Denver the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but white-people” (105).

At the very end, Baby feels betrayed by God, but most betrayed by humanity. When Stamp Paid tells Baby Suggs that she has given up because she blames God, she shifts the focus of the problematic by three times repeating the phrase, “I’m saying they [white folks] came in my yard” (179). The goodness and grace she believed humanity could possess and create have been irrevocably violated, and she feels that humanity is powerless to alter historical circumstance. Prior to Beloved’s death, Baby’s laughter manifested a time when she, like Gavriel and Rodrigues, was able to sustain the dialectical tension between hope and radical evil. For a time, with her work in the Clearing, Baby succeeded in sustaining this impossible fusion of the memory of hope and the memory of horror. When Baby is no longer able to sustain the tension, her laughter ends, and Baby Suggs chooses to retire to her bed to contemplate color.

The third and final collision of narratives Baby undergoes is the collision between her own narrative of resistance and the narrative of Beloved’s death. Up until the point of Sethe’s murder of Beloved, Baby has fought back against the tragic forces in her life, and

refused to be silenced. Baby Suggs becomes an example of a character who can no longer sustain the dialectic between the narrative of hope and the narrative of tragedy any longer. In short, she stops laughing, “Except for an occasional request for color she said practically nothing” (104). In the murder of Beloved, Baby realizes that slavery’s effects were worse than she ever imagined possible. This narrative of tragedy is so great it appears it may eclipse her narrative of hope.

We recall that Surin claims that in the situation of radical negativity, the narrative of faith collides with the narrative of its negation, but neither achieves an ascendancy over the other.²⁵ Thanks to Surin’s analysis, we can see that Baby Suggs, understandably, is an example of someone who can no longer sustain the paradoxical balancing-act of simultaneously affirming both contradictory narratives. In this regard, Baby appears similar to Endo’s characters Inoue and Ferreria, who have also abandoned their faith. In short, the narrative of negativity has gained ascendancy over Baby’s narrative of faith in humanity, grace and goodness. With her relinquishment of the narrative of faith in humanity, she no longer possesses risibility. For Baby Suggs, the narrative of the Beloved’s murder eclipses the possibility of a counter-narrative of hope. Baby goes to bed to contemplate color and gives up speech, as if the struggle to affirm the possibility of hope had become too difficult. Baby’s refusal to laugh signals that she no longer experiences paradox and incongruity. She does not laugh because she no longer feels the both-and character of existence and the in-spite of character of the life of faith. The narrative very sympathetically portrays Baby as someone who can no longer continue the struggle of laughter.

Although Baby Suggs has learned to expect little from white people, she nonetheless comments prior to Beloved's death that even though she was a slave at Sweet Home, "Nobody, but nobody, knocked her down. Not once [. . .] Even when she slipped in cow dung and broke every egg in her apron, nobody said you-black-bitch-what's-the-matter-with-you and nobody knocked her down" (139). Baby thinks that given her experience of radical suffering as a slave, she has experienced the quintessence of rejection and pain; thus she asks, "What was left to hurt her now?" (139)

Morrison seems to suggest that what is left to hurt Baby is the impossible possibility of rejection and cruelty from her own community. It undoubtedly devastates her to acknowledge that not a single member of her community warned her of the impending approach of the slaveowners on the day Sethe murdered Beloved, "Nobody warned them, and he'd [Stamp Paid] always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness—that let them stand aside" (157). Moreover, the knowledge that her own daughter-in-law would kill her own African American child, one of their own beloved, devastates her completely. The white folks have won at last, Baby seems to suggest; they have created a system so oppressive that blacks will kill and reject one another. Baby had learned to live with and against white killing, but Sethe's murder ruptures her narrative of faith so radically that the dialectic cannot be sustained.

Two final comments must be made regarding Baby Suggs' ostensible abandonment of the struggle for hope and protesting laughter. First, going to bed to contemplate color is an activity enshrouded in ambiguity. Does Baby Suggs contemplate color in an attempt to avoid the societal, dichotomous either/or of black and white? Is she

attempting to recover what she has lost, or has she merely lost the narrative of hope?

These questions are not really answerable from textual clues, and offer us hope that maybe she did not abandon protest.

Second, in spite of this unanswerability, whatever Baby Suggs' final stance, the early Baby Suggs' embodiment of resistance outlives her. Her laughter bequeaths a legacy of resistance to all who knew her. She serves as the model of resistance for each of the other character for the rest of their lives. When Sethe, for example, considers letting love in the form of Paul D into her life it is Baby Suggs' voice she hears, urging her to visit the Clearing, and overcome her fear by 'laying down sword and shield' (86). Says Sethe, "Nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much" (87). At the very same moment, to honor and remember Baby Suggs, 'the mountain to his sky,' Stamp Paid chooses to reconcile with Sethe, "While Stamp Paid was making up his mind to visit 124, for Baby Suggs' sake, Sethe was trying to take her advice: to lay it all down, sword and shield" (173). And finally, when Denver makes the transformative choice to leave home and get help for Sethe and Beloved, she does so only because she hears in her spiritual memory the sound of Baby Suggs laughter, "And then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything [. . .] 'There ain't [no defense...] Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on'" (244).

Sixo

Sixo is the second character in *Beloved* whose laughter during the horrors of slavery functions as a creative, counter-hegemonic mode of ethical and theological resistance for

the disenfranchised African American community. Sixo, a slave, lives on Mr. Garner's plantation Sweet Home at the same time as Halle, Sethe and Paul D. Sixo's own particular style of resistance is more difficult to discern and interpret than Baby Suggs' is, in part because he, unlike Baby Suggs, lives his entire life enslaved and has far more limited access to means of resistance. Morrison does not give readers as much access to his psychological and emotional interiority. Whereas Baby Suggs is a preacher who consistently exteriorizes her spirituality of resistance, Sixo, on the other hand, we are told, "Stopped speaking English because there was no future in it" (25).

Laughter as speech-act of resistance to racially-constructed language

Initially, Sixo's partial adoption of silence seems a sign of resignation to despair and acquiescence to the futility of resistance. In analyzing Sixo's life and death as embodiments of resistance, however, we must keep in mind Cone's precautionary statement, "Not all slaves chose to risk their lives in an insurrection; and that did not mean that they accepted the values of their masters. The vast majority of slaves chose other forms of resistance. [. . .]. If we are to interpret rightly the minds of black slaves, we must feel our way into their world, becoming sensitive to the many ways they resisted white slaveholders."²⁶ For four reasons, therefore, Sixo's cessation of speech cannot be interpreted as acquiescence to the state of oppression and its accompanying despair.

First and perhaps most importantly, whereas Baby proceeds existentially from laughter to silence, Sixo proceeds from silence to laughter, a sign that he continues to attempt to express the inexpressible, unlike Baby who unfortunately no longer has the strength to sustain the paradox. Indeed, as we shall see in the end, Sixo's silence is better construed

as a precursor to his laughter, as a testimony to the linguistic rupture experienced by the slaves that creates the space for laughter as extra-linguistic mode of resistance.

Second and relatedly, as Cone reminds us, ordinary linguistic resistance was denied slaves, “Slaves knew that any *open* assertion of their being would be regarded as a threat by slave masters, who were virtually outside the law and could make decisions of life and death even on whim.”²⁷ It is constitutive of the very nature of marginalization that the marginalized are denied a voice; oppression sustains its systemic grip by aspiring to virtual invisibility through the silencing of dissenting voices. Hegemonic thinking absolutizes itself, excluding *a priori* the potential worth of modes of thought other than the ideology endemic to the dominant culture. For Sixo, then, who unlike Baby is still a slave, remaining silent is his way of expressing the question, why speak when no one who actually needs to hear what you have to say will listen?

Dwight Hopkins identifies four areas/disciplines of society that symbolize the means used by the dominant culture to uphold the status quo-- namely, political economy, everyday ordinary living, racial and cultural identity, and language. The hegemonic culture proclaims these disciplines as objective, scientific and value-neutral, yet, argues Hopkins, in reality the dominant white culture exploits all four sociocultural spheres to sustain the slave’s oppression and marginalized existence. The slave therefore, is restricted from accessing these disciplines’ ‘legitimate’ interpretive power. Sixo, therefore, is denied legitimate access to language as a socio-political resource, because those in power refuse to acknowledge his voice. However, slaves often transform these four spheres of hegemony into what Hopkins terms disciplines of creativity: “Hence they [these four areas] exhibit potential transformative spaces of maneuver and counter-

hegemonic acts of liberation. [. . .] In the four disciplines of creativity, we discover sites of struggle and contestation.”²⁸ Sixo transforms the sphere of language into a space of struggle, and we anticipate that laughter plays a crucial counter-hegemonic role in this sphere, as a subversive speech-act and mode of resistance in the face of language’s inaccessibility.

Third, we can interpret Sixo’s rejection of ‘English’ (note the cultural specificity of the term) as an implicit aggressive critique of the language of the white slaveowners. Sixo’s oppressors, along with the white imperialists who began the slave trade, undeniably use the English language to perpetuate dominance and their own egregious ideology. Sixo’s refusal to participate in such language games (and his eventual laughter) bespeak his understanding of the ideological undergirdings and hence inexpediency of his own tongue. Sixo’s refusal to speak is an articulation of the question, why speak when what you are saying will be misconstrued, distorted, and used against you?

Morrison explains that language is inherently problematic for African Americans because it is always, and has been since the inception of slavery, racially constructed. States Morrison, “Language [. . .] can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language. [. . . I try to] free up the language from its almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.”²⁹ Sixo’s silence is a first step toward decolonizing language by calling attention to its desperate need for transformation.

And fourth, Paul Ricoeur reminds us that tragedy and radical negativity inherently resist thought and rupture language. Morrison’s *Beloved* shows clearly that this was indeed the case with the horrors of enslavement and racism. In the novel, African

Americans “neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. The whites didn’t bear speaking on. Everybody knew” (53). During Baby Suggs’ own enslaved days at Sweet Home, “Baby Suggs talked as little as she could get away with because what was there to say that the roots of her tongue could manage” (141). Sixo’s silence therefore is a tacit acknowledgment of the inexpediency of language in these times of radical negativity—the roots of his tongue can in no way adequately articulate all that he endures. Fittingly, Dwight Hopkins entitled his book on slavery, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue*.

For all these reasons, Sixo’s silence cannot be dismissed out of hand as acquiescence to despair and defeatism. But perhaps even more importantly, Sixo’s other behaviors reveal without a doubt that Sixo moves beyond mere silence to active resistance to the system and state of oppression. When Sixo begins plotting his escape, he begins to speak English again. Moreover, bearing striking resemblance to the early Baby Suggs, Sixo practices all of the subversive, extra-linguistic forms of resistance originally advocated by Baby Suggs: dance, song, and finally, laughter.

Sixo, however, unlike Baby Suggs, is forced to rely more heavily on the former supra-linguistic forms of expression, as he is still enslaved and therefore denied access to language as a resource for resistance. For example, when Sixo is caught attempting to escape Sweet Home, he begins immediately to sing. Schoolteacher finds such singing so incongruous and verging on madness that he decides to burn Sixo alive, declaring, “This one will never be suitable” (226). Adds Morrison, “The song must have convinced him” (226). Sixo also, we discover, dances alone at night in the woods to cope with his grief at his separation from his love, the Thirty-Mile Woman Patsy. “Sixo went among trees at

night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open, he said. Privately, alone, he did it. None of the rest of them had seen him at it, but they could imagine it, and the picture they pictured made them eager to laugh at him—in daylight, that is, when it was safe” (25).

Sixo tells his friends about his dancing immediately after he regales them with his tale of a successful rendezvous with the Thirty-Mile Woman—a young girl so named because Sixo walks two thirty-four mile trips within the span of three months in order to court her. At last, he convinces her to walk one-third of the way and they are able to spend a few precious hours together in the woods making love. This rendezvous with the Thirty-mile woman must be seen as an incredible act of resistance in and of itself, for neither Sixo or Patsy “could go anywhere on business of their own” (24). The surreptitious meeting requires slipping away on Sixo’s one afternoon off a week, walking thirty miles on foot in one day, Sixo’s puncturing the girl’s calf to simulate snakebite as an excuse for being late to work, and the solidarity of all Sixo’s friends to cover for his fatigue upon his return to Sweet Home. The entire meeting is undoubtedly punishable by death or a severe beating, should either party be caught: “Since the Thirty-Mile woman was already fourteen and scheduled for somebody’s arms, the danger was real” (24).

Laughter as identity and community creation

One of the most basic human dignities denied the slaves is the right to love and be with the person of their choosing. Though only a teenager, Patsy is ‘scheduled’ for someone else’s arms—with this choice of transactional terms Morrison underscores the business-like objectification of slaves and their treatment as non-persons. Families like

Baby Suggs' are ruthlessly split apart on the auction block, and female slaves are forced to 'breed' often with other slaves, or worse, with the slaveowners themselves. In the world of slavery and domination, blacks are consistently objectified, and are not acting subjects. bell hooks, African American feminist ethicist, explains that the oppressed must defy such objectification:

As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject. [...] Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story.³⁰

Sixo certainly tells his own story here, "He told the story to Paul F, Halle and Paul D in the peculiar way that made them cry-laugh," but furthermore, he resists objectification within a system of servitude by reclaiming himself as an acting subject. His solitary dance in the woods, moving to a rhythm uniquely of his own creation, symbolizes this reclamation and self-empowerment. In loving Patsy, a choice which is entirely independent of the dominant ideology, Sixo effectively challenges the ubiquitous external assaults on his being. Against all odds, Sixo chooses to love a woman whom the dominant culture would deem not 'his' to love. While all the other Sweet Home men desire Sethe as she is the only black woman Mr. Garner has placed in their immediate midst as available to them, Sixo makes choices beyond Mr. Garner's pseudo-choices, thereby defining his own reality, "Because of the Thirty-Mile Woman Sixo was the only

one not paralyzed by yearning for Sethe” (25). Sixo asserts himself as a self-valuing person worthy of love and of making his own decisions.

In so doing, Sixo exhibits the independent consciousness preached by Baby Suggs. For him, this consciousness is an indispensable weapon of resistance, capable of exposing the dominant consciousness as oppressive ideology and thereby empowering him for greater acts of revolution. African American folk literature is replete with resistance stories of the Way-Maker who co-labors with black humanity to ‘make a way out of no way.’ In our narrative, when Sethe longs for the presence of Baby Suggs she affirms her existence as a way-maker, saying, “Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way” (95). Similarly, Sixo’s love, rendezvous and sexual encounter with the Thirty-Mile Woman all exemplify the way in which he miraculously makes a way out of no way.

Unsurprisingly, a closer look at the text reveals that Sixo therefore comes to embody in the eyes of the other slaves a heroic paradigm of liberation. His laughter engenders solidarity. Indeed, much like Baby Suggs, we can argue that he creates around himself a culture of resistance, in which he inspires others to actively participate. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes offers the following elucidating definition of a culture of resistance:

Oppressed people often try to develop and instill values that differ drastically from those communicated by the dominant culture. [...] In the African-American experience, such innovation and resistance has been a response to the constant pressure to devise “a way out of no way.” [...] Culture is composed of people’s collective and cumulative efforts at prescriptions for human behavior. Cultures of resistance are no different, except that they are constructed in opposition to a more

powerful dominant culture. In order to construct oppositional ways of thinking and acting, people must be able to idealize their oppositional alternatives. They must be able to point to people who embody those roles in order to be socialized or to socialize others. [. . .] The actors in these new or refashioned roles are charged with maintaining an alternative, critical worldview within a community under pressure to conform to dominant ways.³¹

Although Townsend Gilkes is not discussing the slave era, the phrase culture of resistance still applies to both Baby Suggs and Sixo, both of whom construct a way of thinking and acting that is oppositional to the dominant culture. Both characters, each within their respective settings, embody an alternative, critical worldview that instills in those around them a yearning for liberation and self-empowerment. Such an interpretation accords with Hopkins, who asserts that even the seemingly disempowered slaves had their own particular culture of resistance and ethic of survival even in the grips of white supremacy

Interestingly, Hopkins and Cummings identify as central to this ethic of survival the slaves' 'taking-not-stealing practice:'

Instead of obeying their earthly owners, African American chattel [. . .] differentiated between stealing and taking. They defined 'stealing as the illegal removal of a fellow bondservant's private property and taking as the removal of that which they believed the master had wrongfully stolen from the slaves. [. . .] The necessity of sheer survival mandated that they had to preserve their lives, that is, their humanity, by removing the basic provisions from the master's till. [. . .] A perspective from below, a perspective of black human survival, identified and

affirmed right and wrong in contrast to those white folks who held privilege and power in society.³²

In *Beloved*, Sixo embodies the taking-not-stealing ethic of survival; indeed, it is he who introduces it to the others at Sweet Home as a mode of resistance. Sethe, as she ‘takes’ from her employer even as a freedwoman years after Sixo’s death, still recollects Sixo’s example as an embodiment of an alternative, critical worldview:

“Did you steal that shoat? You stole that shoat.” Schoolteacher was quiet but firm, like he was just going through the motions—not expecting an answer that mattered. Sixo sat there, not even getting up to plead or deny. He just sat there, the streak-of-lean in his hand, the gristle clustered in the tin plate like gemstones—rough, unpolished, but loot nevertheless.

“You stole that shoat, didn’t you?”

“No, Sir.” Said Sixo, but he had the decency to keep his eyes on the meat.

“You telling me you didn’t steal it, and I’m looking right at you?”

“No, sir, I didn’t steal it.”

Schoolteacher smiled. “Did you kill it?”

“Yes, sir. I killed it....”

“Well, then. Did you eat it?”

“Yes, sir. I sure did.”

“And you telling me that’s not stealing?”

“No, sir. It ain’t.”

“What is it then?”

“Improving your property, sir.”

“What?”

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.” (190)

Here, Sixo differentiates between stealing and taking, as he insists to Schoolteacher that he has not *stolen* the shoat but “Sixo *take* and feed Sixo.” Again, Sixo’s independent consciousness results in rebellious action. Sixo has self-defined the situation and his proper place in it. His actions contain an aggressive social critique and oppositional worldview that even Schoolteacher recognizes as precociously beyond the pale of the hegemonic worldview, “Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined” (191).

For the most part, Sixo’s existence is defined by the slaveowners. Even his ‘name’—six, zero—is the very quintessence of dehumanization, as it is merely a number that presumably comes straight from his bill of sale, assigned to him by the definers. The act of naming was so important to slaves, because it was a right that they were for the most part denied, once again revealing the slave’s limited access to language. Baby Suggs’ refusal to relinquish her real name, for example, signifies her active commitment to self-definition. Baby’s bill-of-sale name is Jenny Whitlow, yet she refuses to accept this name. She tells Mr. Garner as she begins her life of freedom, “Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn’t call me Jenny;” and Mr. Garner answers, “If I was you I’d stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro. Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the ‘husband’ she claimed” (142). When asked about the significance of names, Morrison herself replied in an interview,

I never knew the real names of my father's friends. [...] They used other names.

A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage, part of it with the rejection of the name given to them under circumstances not of their choosing. If you come from Africa, your name is gone. [...] That's a huge psychological scar. The best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice.³³

Although Sixo does seem to go by the name given him by the oppressors, with his final breath he subverts the name by himself designating a name for his creation—i.e., his unborn child, 'Seven-o.'

Additionally, Sixo becomes a definer by his actions, actions proceeding from an alternative consciousness that at every turn challenges the dominant consciousness. In particular, Sixo possesses and practices his own moral code, rather than merely adopting that of the white slaveowners, who dictate that stealing from their superfluity is an absolute moral wrong. Cone comments on the practice of slave 'stealing,' "Black people rejected these definitions of good and bad. [...] They formulated a *new* law and a *new* morality that reflected the requirements of *black* existence. [...] To be right meant doing whatever was necessary to stay alive with dignity. To be wrong meant accepting without struggle the place masters had defined."³⁴

Despite the fact that "after the conversation about the shoat, Sixo is tied up with the stock at night," the other slaves clearly consider his behavior to be right, and not wrong. Indeed, the other slaves at Sweet Home eventually adopt Sixo's moral code as their own, "They began to pilfer in earnest, and it became not only their right but their obligation" (191). Sixo's practice of taking-not-stealing as an ethics of survival is part of the culture

of resistance that he creates Sweet Home. Even though he is punished and locked up in a pen at night, Sixo does not acquiesce to despair or helplessness. Instead, he begins to plot his escape in earnest, and we are told, "Sixo keeps a nail in his mouth now, to help him undo the rope when he has to" (223). The nail in Sixo's mouth is literal, but it also functions figuratively as the protesting hope, always just below the surface of the silenced tongue, that Sixo sustains in spite of hopelessness.

Laughter as transcendence of fear

Sixo's position vis-à-vis the dominant white slaveowners is extraordinarily dangerous. On some level Paul and the others know that to side with him in the hours of darkness is tantamount to participating in his vision of liberation, which he plans to actualize. Oddly, Paul D and the other Sweet Home men 'laugh' at Sixo's dancing, but only in the daylight 'when it's safe.' To laugh with Sixo at night means to participate in his broader scheme for liberation, for it is during the nighttime hours that the Sweet Home slaves plan to run away from the plantation across the Ohio River to freedom. And it is none other than Sixo who instigates and orchestrates this plan of escape, the plot that indeed results in Sethe's and Patsy's freedom, and creates a way out of no way:

Sixo, hitching up the horses, is speaking English again and tells Halle what his Thirty-Mile Woman told him. That seven Negroes on her place were joining two others going North. [. . .] Sixo was going, his woman was going. [. . .]

Now all they have to do is wait through the spring, till the corn is as high as it ever got and the moon as fat.

And plan. Is it better to leave in the dark to get a better start, or go at daybreak to be able to see the way better? Sixo spits at the suggestion. Night gives them more time and the protection of color. He does not ask them if they are afraid. He manages some dry runs to the corn at night, burying blankets and two knives near the creek. (222)

Sixo does not ask them if they are afraid because he himself has transcended fear, the debilitating fear that is the result of the psychological abuse of oppression. Here we are reminded of Gavriel, whose laugh was “laugh of a man who has known total fear and is no longer afraid of anyone or anything.” (18).

It is not coincidental that Sixo, the character in the novel who laughs most poignantly and incongruously, is the character who dreams the most of freedom. While Baby Suggs leaves those around her to ponder her final statement that white folks have robbed her of everything, Sixo leaves his friends to ponder his incongruous laughter at the moment of his death. In contemplating escape, the ultimate act of resistance and liberation, Sixo once again thinks outside the box of his companions, thinks with an independent consciousness. While all the other slaves sleep, he alone ‘creeps’ at night. While all the other slaves contemplate legally buying themselves out of slavery, Sixo plans real escape. Sethe explains:

We should have begun to plan. But we didn’t. I don’t know what we thought—but getting away was a money thing to us. Buy out. Running was nowhere on our minds. All of us? Some? Where to? How to go? It was Sixo who brought it up, finally. [. . .] Sixo started watching the sky. He was the only one who crept at night and Halle said that’s how he learned about the train. [. . .] Halle was pointing over

the stable. [. . .] ”Sixo say freedom is that way. A whole train is going and if we can get there, don’t need to be no buy-out” [. . .] Sixo watched the sky. Not the high part, the low part where it touched the trees. You could tell his mind was gone from Sweet Home. (197)

In these lines, we note that even Sethe notices how Sixo thinks beyond the status quo of white consciousness—“you could tell his mind was gone from Sweet Home.” In contemplating a future of freedom, a possibility that Schoolteacher attempts to teach the slaves is an impossibility, Sixo successfully thinks beyond oppression and its ideology. Patricia Hill Collins comments that even if change cannot be brought about externally in society itself, African Americans often have and can a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. She adds, “People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions. [. . .] This level of individual consciousness is a fundamental area where new knowledge can generate change.”³⁵ Not coincidentally, when Sixo begins planning his freedom, he also resumes speaking English.

As a slave, Sixo is unable to resist oppression at the systemic level, but the narrative is replete with instances of Sixo resisting oppression at the level of personal biography. In dancing, singing, taking-not-stealing, plotting escape and eventually by laughing, Sixo manifests and sustains a changed consciousness, one which is liberated from the white slave-owners’ ideology. Sixo accordingly frequently offers an alternative (and correct) interpretation of events that is opposed to that of white consciousness, and leads the other slaves in laughter at the ridiculousness of white ignorance, “Sixo said the doctor made

Mrs. Garner sick. Said he was giving her to drink what stallions got when they broke a leg and no gunpowder could be spared, and had it not been for schoolteacher's new rules, he would have told her so. They laughed at him. Sixo had a knowing tale about everything" (219). Within this changed consciousness, not only is Sixo 'free' psychologically and spiritually on the 'inside,' he also is empowered enough to begin to dream of actualized freedom, and to take active steps to bring such dreams to fruition. More importantly, Sixo's 'new knowledge' spills over to the group, generating change and resistance at the communal level, as Halle and the slaves learn of this radically new possibility of freedom and share this knowledge with one another: "Sixo say freedom is that way" (197).

The apotheosis of Sixo's life of resistance is his final laughter as he laughs in the face of death. Sixo's planned escape goes horribly wrong, and both he and Paul D are captured. When Sixo is captured, he sings, but his singing is a subversive act of resistance in that it secretly allows Sethe and the Thirty-Mile Woman to escape. Sixo selflessly and effectively creates a scene that distracts Schoolteacher and the men long enough for the women to get away. While singing, Sixo grabs one of the men's rifles and is able to strike him with it, in his only act of violent resistance. Sixo's incongruous singing and physical retaliation leads Schoolteacher to consider Sixo mad and therefore unfit even for slavery. Schoolteacher horrifically proceeds to burn Sixo alive on the spot:

The fire keeps failing and the whitemen are put out with themselves for not being prepared for this emergency. They came to capture, not to kill. What they can manage is only enough for cooking hominy. Dry faggots are scarce and the grass is slick with dew.

By the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs, a rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater. His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes. He laughs. Something is funny. Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out out, "Seven-O! Seven-O!"

Smoky, stubborn fire. They shoot him to shut him up. Have to. (226)

Sixo, therefore, laughs not only at the moment of his death, but also laughs at death itself. This image of a slave man being burned while laughing alive jolts the reader, shocks us with its terrifying pain and incongruity. The image is undeniably grotesque. His laughter, because it transcends fear, terrifies his oppressors, but have to 'shut him up.' I am reminded of the words of Jurgen Moltmann: "The power of the powerless lies in such liberations from fear, in their laughter at the expense of deified rulers who are nothing after all but dolled-up dwarfs. People who are no longer afraid [...] can no longer be ruled with ease, although of course they can be shot."³⁶

Laughter as manifestation of dual consciousness

Susan Corey's analysis of Morrison's use of the grotesque in *Beloved*, although she does not specifically analyze the character of Sixo or his laughter, helps us to unpack the complexity of Sixo's laughter in his crucial death-scene. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, Corey defines the grotesque as an "aesthetic phenomenon that encourages the creation of meaning and the discovery of new connections through its effect of shock, confusion, disorder, or contradiction. The grotesque breaks the boundaries of normalcy in some way and always points toward the mysterious and inexplicable."³⁷ Undoubtedly Sixo's

laughter shocks the white slaveowners who surround him in the same way that Sixo's song does—both are inexplicable, bafflingly contradictory, and seemingly without cause. The white slaveowners can only attribute his laughter to madness. It is not 'sane'—i.e. in line with hegemonic white thought.

Yet it is precisely the glaring inexplicability of Sixo's laughter that warrants our analysis. With Sixo's laughter, Morrison draws attention to its occasion: the gross injustice of the existing social system in which a man can be burned alive on a whim, without repercussion, because of a song. Morrison herself writes of her use of the grotesque, "Something really terrible [. . .] is always a push toward the abyss somewhere to see what is remarkable, because that's the way to find out what is heroic. That's the way I know why such people survive, who went under, who didn't, [. . .] because our existence here has been grotesque."³⁸

Sixo laughs because the situation is absurd, as indeed slavery is absurd—a grotesque exaggeration and materialization of a will-to-power. Cone defines the absurd as that which is meaningless, "We [African Americans] are seeking meaning in a world permeated with philosophical and theological absurdities."³⁹ Sixo's laugh is heroic because it is a mode of survival, of resistance to the despair and quietism inflicted by existential meaninglessness.

Morrison presents us with a disturbing and grotesquely distorted image because she wants to disorient us into recognizing that the image merely reflects the reality of slave life, which indeed was a grotesque distortion of life. Explains Corey:

The grotesque enables a writer to challenge conventional ideals, values, and structures; and to expose evil or oppressive social institutions and practices. Thus

the grotesque assists a writer to present a paradoxical vision of a world “held largely by the devil,” yet infused with moments of grace and hope for renewal through contact with a larger world of meanings. [. . .] The grotesque has the effect of [. . .] undermining the established order and exposing oppressive systems. [. . .] The grotesque allows the writer to challenge any final or closed version of the truth [. . .] and to explore the paradoxical, ambiguous, mixed nature of human life.⁴⁰

Morrison uses the image of Sixo being burned alive to expose the evil and absurdity of the slave institution, along with the paradox of Sixo’s existence. Yet we must explore the precise nature of the paradoxes that Sixo’s death exposes in order to discover wherein lies the puzzling grace and renewal to which Corey alludes.

Mikhail Bahktin not only notes that laughter is an essential element of the grotesque, but states that without the principle of laughter the genre of the grotesque would be impossible. Bahktin argues for a reinterpretation of the ambivalence of the grotesque. In his mind, the grotesque bespeaks the reality of debasement and horror on the one hand, and the possibility of regeneration and renewal on the other. In Bahktin’s view, the latter positive purpose of the grotesque is largely ignored. Laughter is appropriate to the grotesque for Bahktin because it too shares this ambivalence and regenerating potential. Laughter is appropriate to the grotesque situation because it attests to this dual consciousness—the coexistence of horror and hope, meaninglessness and meaning, terror and faith in regeneration-- in a way that language cannot. Laughter attests to the possibility of regeneration but only paradoxically and painfully, because the need for regeneration is necessitated by a grotesque situation wherein regeneration is grossly absent.

Bakhtin's discussion of laughter accords with our theological interpretation of laughter as an attempt by the suffering individual to sustain the integrity of both the narrative of faith and the narrative of negativity and to hold both narratives in dialectical tension. Laughter sustains a certain ambivalence, capturing a "both-and" existential situation in a way that cognitive discourse cannot attain without reductionistic tendencies toward 'either/or.' In Sixo's death scene, therefore, Morrison uses the grotesque image and Sixo's laughter to sustain the paradox of his existence and to thrust this paradox into the reader's consciousness.

Sixo's experience of the world as paradoxical and incongruous on multiple levels occasions his laughter. According to Schopenhauer:

All laughter [. . .] is occasioned by a paradox. [. . .] Accordingly the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception. The greater and more unexpected, in the apprehension of the laugher, this incongruity is, the more violent will be his laughter.⁴¹

Sixo experiences paradox in that he is both African and American (note that that there is no existential option of either/or). He is not free in a country that upholds liberty as its highest ideal. Sixo labors under the existential burden of being dually defined. He is defined by contradiction. He strives for self-definition, yet any emerging self-valuation always competes with the hegemonic definition of blacks as inferior non-beings. I am reminded of Malxolm X, who argued that black life in America is an absurd paradox: "Anything that's paradoxical has to have some humor in it, or it'll crack you

up....Because it's a contrast a paradox. And America is such a paradoxical society, hypocritically paradoxical, that if you don't have some humor, you'll crack up....You have to be able to laugh to stand up and sing, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty.' *That's a joke. And if you don't laugh at it, it'll crack you up.*'"⁴²

W. E. B. DuBois states that racism imposes an existential dilemma on its victims which results in an identity crisis and struggle. Dubois characterizes this dilemma as the African American experience of a "double self." Writes Dubois, "One feels his two-ness—an American Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body. [...] The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife."⁴³ A greater incongruity than the intrinsic value of African Americans as persons and the severely subordinate value placed on them by white society can perhaps not be imagined. Thus the incisive violence of Sixo's death-laughter, a laughter arising out of 'two-ness.'

Cone adds that slavery imposes another existential paradox on all who are enslaved, "Under the law, slaves were property and persons. But the two definitions together were absurd, because property and persons are mutually exclusive modes of being which negate one another."⁴⁴ Once again, laughter steps in to capture the actual coexistence of two modes of being which ostensibly negate one another. Language cannot possibly express such an existential dilemma in its fullness. It defies rationality to assert that I am both person and property, both liberated and enslaved, both utterly affirmed and utterly negated. And so, Sixo for a time jettisons speech altogether, and in his final moments, chooses only to laugh. Laughter, unlike language, holds both sides of these paradoxes in dialectical tension, thereby reflecting Sixo's actual experience of the commingling of

these oppositional states. Discursive thought asserts the either/or, whereas laughter can incarnate the inherently complex “both-and,” in spite of character of the existence and resistance of the marginalized. Sixo’s very existence is shot through with paradox, and his laughter functions to sustain this paradox and live through it.

Fascinatingly, many African American theorists, particularly black women who labor under a double oppression, argue that ‘either/or’ thought is inherently hegemonic and ideological. bell hooks claims either/or dichotomous thinking to be “the central ideological component of all systems of domination in western society.”⁴⁵ hooks seems to suggest that the fundamental problem with dichotomous thought is that it is always, if only surreptitiously, hierarchical. She writes, “Either/or dichotomous thinking categorizes people, things and ideas in terms of their difference from one another.”⁴⁶ Patricia Hill Collins argues the same in her book *Black Feminist Thought*: “This emphasis on quantification and categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked. The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy is privileged while its other is denigrated.”⁴⁷

In the either/or schema, then, the two concepts or parties being compared are not only different, but also are implicitly unequal. Either/or implies not only a comparison but a contrast; the two concepts are opposed to one another, and one side of the either/or dichotomy is more ‘right’ or better than the other. For example either you are black, or you are white; you cannot be both (hence the difficulty our society has had in accepting the ambiguity of interracial couples). Either God (and hence life) is good and just, or life is bad and unjust. Either you are enslaved, or you are free. Either one is American, or one is African. Either Sixo is defeated, or he is triumphant. Either Sethe is the savior of

her children, or she is their murderer. As a society we hate ambiguity, and when we encounter it, we are intolerant of it, striving to reduce it to either/or.⁴⁸ This is particularly true, all too true, in the realm of ethics and theology.

But as *Beloved* and *Silence* and *Gates of the Forest* testify, sometimes ambiguity is real. Sometimes we live existentially in the ‘both-and,’ and it is there that we must live, find or create meaning, believe or not believe, and make ethical decisions. Theology ignores this truth to its peril, according to Cone who states, “Theological language must be paradoxical because the necessity of affirming two dimensions of reality which appear to be contradictory.”⁴⁹ Either/or discursive thought is often reductionistic, and therefore theology needs to reevaluate its use of it. Many African American thinkers point out that either/or thought is usually racist, sexist, classist--in short, ideological and resulting in the explicit marginalization of certain people’s experiences. A good case in point is the glaring fact that theology has for too long ignored the experience of the oppressed, and their laughter.

Dominant, hegemonic thought has a hidden drive to sustain and reinforce either/or thinking, because this is its ideological scaffolding. Thus Schoolteacher and the whites categorize Sixo and Sethe as ‘mad,’ just as Janos and the other Nazis consider Gavriel mad; all these characters reject either/or and befuddle those at the top of the systems of domination. Morrison’s text reminds us of these dangers of either/or, and the potentially rich ethical and theological resource of ‘both-and’ modes of thought.

Sixo labors under the paradox of ‘both-and’ in the sense that that although he is radically dehumanized, he on several levels indefatigably affirms his humanity and that of the other slaves. First, his laughter and song allow the Thirty-Mile Woman to escape.

Second, Sixo's laughter asserts that he affirms himself as worthy of life even in the face of Schoolteacher's absurd death-dealing. For surely, if Sixo merely accepted Schoolteacher's view of himself, there would be no perceived incongruity, no paradox, and consequently no laughter. Sixo's laughter therefore attests to his refusal to accept the oppressor's view of his person as non-being. We must understand such a psychological feat of non-acquiescence as an incredible act of resistance, as whites condition slaves to internalize a negative self-image and sense of inferiority. Cone explains, "There is such a thing as living physically while being dead spiritually. As long as blacks let whites define the limits of their being, blacks are dead. 'To be or not to be' is thus a dilemma for the black community: to assert one's humanity and be killed, or to cling to life and sink into nonhumanity."⁵⁰

Laughter as deconstruction of oppression

Paradoxically, then, it is genuine life Sixo chooses by choosing death, even though choosing to resist and assert his humanity results in his physical death. Cone's assertion that clinging to life can result in nonhumanity is nowhere better revealed than in this comparison of Sixo and Paul D. Reflecting on Sixo and his life and death, Paul D says admiringly, "Now *there* was a man. [. . .] Himself [. . .] didn't compare" (22). Paul D chooses not to resist and to live, but it is he who ends up feeling unhuman, wearing a three-bit animal collar and envying a rooster, Mister, for his vastly greater freedom, "Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. [. . .] Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. [. . .] Wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a

tub” (72). Paul D concludes, “He couldn’t figure out why it took so long. He may as well have jumped in the fire with Sixo and they both could have had a good laugh” (219). Ironically, Sixo is dead but spiritually and psychologically alive; whereas Paul D is alive but emotionally and psychically dead. In the words of Ignazio Silone, “Freedom is not something you get as a present. [. . .] You can live in a dictatorship and be free—on one condition: that you fight the dictatorship. The man who thinks with his own mind and keeps it uncorrupted is free.”⁵¹

Sixo’s laughter witnesses to a psychological and spiritual form of freedom, even though he is physically bound and facing death. Morrison, commenting on another of her characters, says, “He is the thing I keep calling a ‘free man,’ not free in the legal sense, but free in his head. [. . .] I’m interested in characters who are lawless in that regard. They make up their lives.”⁵² We say the same of Sixo—he is free in his head. Cone asserts that slaves not only seek freedom-from-bondage, they also exhibit what he terms freedom-in-bondage. Sixo’s laughter therefore manifests his freedom-in-bondage, an emotional, spiritual and psychological freedom.

Morrison comments on her work, “What’s important [. . .] is the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it. I’m trying to explore how a people [. . .] absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something [slavery] that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely.”⁵³ Schoolteacher decides at the moment he begins to burn Sixo alive that Sixo is not even worthy of life, commenting, “This one will never be suitable” (226). Sixo’s laughter and song, however, deconstruct this negation of his being. It is the cruel nature of oppression that the oppressors can make flippant life and death decisions of this kind for the oppressed.

However, it is also the nature of oppression that the oppressed can, to the extent they are able, deconstruct and resist this definition of themselves as sub-human and reject it, which Sixo powerfully does. Indeed, what can be more incredible than the fact that those oppressed by Christian thought such as the slaves did not simply reject the faith outright? Instead, although Christianity for centuries was used to justify oppression, millions of its victims reinterpreted it to justify their liberation. It is an astounding example of deconstruction.

Sixo's laughter, then, much like Gavriel's, ruptures the dualism of hope and tragedy. Although usually we consider tragedy to be a situation of hopelessness, this kind of laughter asserts the paradoxical notion of tragic hope. Utilizing Cornel West's terms, we can say that Sixo's laughter is a form of 'aggressive waiting,' or a mode of 'revolutionary patience.' Sixo's laughter takes on a proleptic, anticipatory character. Sixo, similar to the Hasid, inculcates "a certain kind of joy that will be justified only retroactively."⁵⁴ Sixo's laughter attests to the already-but-not-yet liberation he experiences through the possession of an independent consciousness. His laughter imaginatively recreates both the present and the future by its very existence. And even though Sixo does not live to see his son born or his dreams of freedom actualized, his laughter transforms his mode-of-being by naming the present as absurd in the anticipation of freedom.

He laughs (and dances and sings) for the imagined future, in which liberation is universal and pervades all levels of existence, in a manner reminiscent of Wiesel's comment, "Even if we find no faith we must raise it up in the hope that one day we will understand why, and that one day we will be able to give a reason for believing."⁵⁵ Sixo believes and hopes for freedom in order that one day such hope might be justified. His

laughter is proleptic liberation, or to borrow a term from Cone, a form of proleptic transcendence.

Laughter as demystification of power

Michel Foucault insightfully argues that power relationships always structurally include resistance to that very power:

Where there is power, there is resistance. [. . .] [A relationship of power] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances. [. . .] And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that make a revolution possible.⁵⁶

As Kelly Brown Douglas points out, Foucault has a bottom-up analysis of power relationships. In his theory, institutional change always begins below, at the microlevels of society, with people who alter microlevel relationships. For our purposes, Foucault's analysis is helpful because it demystifies power by democratizing both power and resistance. Power relationships are sustained at least in part by those who are in them; hence they are also changed by those in them.

Foucault's radical re-understanding of power helps us interpret Sixo's character. Foucault's analysis is radical because it places the potentiality for revolutionary change within societal power structures into the hands of those who are seemingly disempowered. Paradoxically then, the seemingly powerless individuals like Sixo in reality are empowered through resistance. Thanks to Foucault, we discern that systemic

change begins with the smallest individual act of resistance, with, for example, the slightest shift in the balance of power between a slave and his master. Every microlevel act, therefore, even a laugh of the oppressed, takes on potential revolutionary significance.

In *Beloved*, Sixo fearlessly alters his power relationship with Schoolteacher, by taking-not-stealing food he considers himself entitled to, loving the woman of his choice, attempting escape, and finally by singing and laughing in his master's face even as he is murdered. Sixo's laughter is defiant and emancipatory. Laughter is a preservation of Sixo's dignity, as Schoolteacher expects and desires Sixo to cry and despair in the moment of terror. Of course, Sixo's joyous laughter and song appear so unanticipated and strange to Schoolteacher that he attributes them to madness. Sixo's laugh so disturbs and violates Schoolteacher's sense of absolute control over his slaves that Schoolteacher finds it unbearable. Schoolteacher re-seizes a semblance of control in the situation by not passively allowing the fire do his killing for him, "They shoot him [Sixo] to shut him up. Have to" (226). Schoolteacher 'has to' shoot Sixo because he cannot allow his precocious laughter, which alters and upsets the power relationship between them in a way that is evident to all present, to continue.

For certainly, the slaves around Sixo interpret his laughter as liberation from fear and indignity. Like Gavriel's and Baby Suggs', Sixo's laughter emancipates. Laughter is repeatedly associated throughout *Beloved* with actualized moments of freedom, both psychological and physical. When, for example, Baby Suggs reaches freedom in Ohio we read, "her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? [. . .] She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud. [. . .] She couldn't stop laughing. [. . .] She covered her mouth to keep from laughing too loud" (141). Similarly, in the beautiful scene when Sethe and the

girls temporarily celebrate their freedom from the past and skate carefree over the ice, the mother and daughters all laugh repeatedly as “nobody saw them falling” (175). When Sethe, at last a free woman, relaxes after her daring escape to the north, “Sethe’s laugh of delight was so loud the crawling-already baby blinked. [. . .] She [Sethe] didn’t cry. [. . .] Baby Suggs came in and laughed at them”(93-4). But in the end, Sixo dies. Is his laughter still emancipatory despite the fact that the oppressors ‘win’ in his case?

As strange as it may seem, Sixo’s laughter as he is put to death represents the apotheosis of his lifetime of heroic gestures of defiance and self-valuation. Paul D affirms that he watches Sixo, “whom he loved better than his brothers, roast without a tear just so the roasters would know what a man was like” (126). Paul D wishes that he could sing and laugh along with Sixo, but at that time he has not yet reached the freedom-in-bondage state of resistance that Sixo has. Comments Paul D on Sixo’s final song, “He thinks he should have sung along. Loud, something loud and rolling to go with Sixo’s tune, but the words put him off, he didn’t understand the words. Although it shouldn’t have mattered because he understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba” (227).

Here again, one of Morrison’s characters testifies to the fact that language cannot speak to the unspeakable horror they have endured. We never learn the words to Sixo’s song, nor do the slaves understand or repeat the words, because the negativity is so radical language is ruptured by it. During the antebellum period, slaves were jailed for singing the spiritual, “We’ll soon be free.” When forbidden to sing, slaves hummed the song, and Raboteau argues that the song itself nonetheless functioned as an indirect form of social criticism. Sixo’s wordless song also conveys an aggressive social critique of white ideology and practice: unleashed hatred that dances its way into the consciousness

of the hearer. Sixo's words to his song are not important. What is most important is the fact that he can still sing, when every reason for singing has been taken away from him. Cone concurs, "It does not matter what oppressors say or do or what they try to make us out to be. We know we have a freedom not made of human hands. It is this faith that defines our person, and thus enables black people to sing when the world says they have nothing to sing about."⁵⁷

Paul D describes Sixo's laughter as oddly joyful, "What a laugh. So rippling and full of glee it put out the fire" (229). The narrator compares it to the laughter of a child at play—"a rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater." Sixo's laughter baffles the white onlookers as incomprehensible in its glee. It interrupts the state of oppression, that is, the emotional states of despair and misery and the psychological states of learned helplessness and learned inferiority. Also, Sixo's laugh interrupts the system of oppression—"puts out the fire"-- because it shifts the burden of bewilderment, paradox, and hermeneutical chaos onto white shoulders.

Laughter as tragic hope

Schoolteacher and his men have taken away every reason for laughter and joy, yet Sixo laughs anyway, manifesting an independent consciousness that has survived against all odds. Writes Dwight Hopkins of slave laughter,

African Americans worked with the Spirit of freedom within their own souls by employing laughter to declare a statement about the unbroken self. Whites with power cannot fathom the logic of laughter gushing forth from black bodies lame with injury. Indeed, black laughter, expressed in excruciating pain, creates and

exhibits its own rhetoric of survival, resistance, and self-transformation for the black oppressed.⁵⁸

Sixto is unafraid to die, and this fearlessness makes him free, much like the ex-slave Frederick Douglas who reflects, “I had reached the point at which I was not afraid to die. This Spirit made me a freeman in fact, while I remained a slave in form.”⁵⁹

Cornel West argues for an interpretation of African American laughter as conveying a worldview of tragic hope. For West, the African American consciousness places “an enduring emphasis on the tragic facts of human existence: death, disease, disappointment, dread, and despair [...] But the radically comic character of African American life—the pervasive sense of joy, laughter, and ingenious humor in the black community—flows primarily from the African American preoccupation with tragedy.”⁶⁰ Sixto laughs not only in spite of tragedy, but because of it. Like much of African American laughter as described by West and Hopkins, Sixto’s laughter commingles hope and tragedy, joy and pain, despair and love.

This admixture leads us to one final paradox of the situation of Sixto’s death that we have not yet mentioned. Sixto’s grotesque death is also, a moment pregnant, quite literally, with regeneration and hope. Sixto’s death accords perfectly with Bakhtin’s argument for an understanding of the grotesque as ambivalent, and never mere negation. Bakhtin argues that death in the grotesque is better understood as ‘birth-giving-death’:

Laughter degrades and materializes. [...] Degradation here means [...] the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. [...] Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it

has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. [. . .]

Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb.

It is always conceiving.⁶¹

Sixo's death is shot through with this Bakhtinian two-sidedness of the 'both-and;' his final moment marks not only death, debasement, and hopelessness but also conception, regeneration, and hope. For in Sixo's final moments the one word he shouts in the midst of his laughter is the word: Seven-0. Sixo sings and resists Schoolteacher and his men in order to distract them from the fact that the Thirty-Mile Woman is escaping up the river. In effect, Sixo sacrifices his life in order to save the Thirty-mile woman. But Sixo saves more than just her; through an oblique remark made by Paul D we discover that the shout Seven-0! indicates that Sixo has just learned the Thirty-Mile Woman is pregnant with his unborn child. "Something is funny, Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out, 'Seven-0! Seven-0! [. . .] Seven-0! Seven-0 because his Thirty Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed" (226, 228-9).

Because of Sixo's sacrifice, this child and its mother make their way to freedom in the north. Because of Sixo's life of resistance and love, this child was conceived against all odds. In the midst of the oppressor's death dealing, Sixo succeeds in life-giving. Although the white men want to rob Sixo of both life and dignity, Sixo's laughter suggests that their victory is penultimate, as the ultimate triumph of love and freedom is Sixo's as yet unborn child in the soon-to-be-free Thirty-Mile Woman's womb. The joke, in other words, is on them.

In a strange turn of events, then, Sixo's choice of death, which seems the quintessence of passivity, becomes an act of resistance. The choice of death, rather than a life of

egregious oppression, is indeed the central theme of *Beloved*. Sethe chooses death for herself and her children rather than return to a life of enslavement; but she is apprehended prior to carrying out her suicide. James Cone asserts, “Black resistance has roots stretching back to the slave ships. [. . .] It began when the first black person decided that death would be preferable to slavery.”⁶² Dwight Hopkins concurs, “To claim control over and freedom for the black body [. . .] was to assert that one’s humanity reflected sacred creation. [. . .] Suicide suggested an ultimate determination to remove an unpaid labor commodity from the slave system and, consequently, was a blow against the macropolitical economy.”⁶³

We must recognize also that Margaret Garner was not the only slave attempting suicide and murdering her children as a means of resistance to enslavement. Suicide by fasting was so common on slave ships that a compulsory feeding device was implemented. Historian William Cheek reports that the agony of slavery pushed some black men and women to commit acts of self violence as a means of resistance. Slaves would routinely chop off their own fingers and toes, eat dirt in order to induce serious illness or death, and commit infanticide. Notes Delores Williams, “African American women [. . .] killed their children to keep them from a life of enslavement. [. . .] A mother on a Georgia plantation killed thirteen of her babies to save them from slavery.”⁶⁴ Our analysis of Sixo’s laughter and death therefore is crucial, as it provides with a key for better understanding the complexities of Sethe’s murder of *Beloved*.

Paul D

Laughter as mode of survival

The third and final character in the novel whose laugh merits our analysis is Paul D. Paul D learns much from Sixo's embodiment of resistance and eventually comes to emulate him. But when Paul D first shows up at 124 Bluestone Road, he is a 'walking man' just trying to leave the past behind:

He didn't believe he could live with a woman—any woman—for over two out of three months. That was about as long as he could abide one place...walking off when he got ready was the only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains. [. . .] After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, [. . .] for more required him to dwell on Halle's face and Sixo laughing. (40-41)

Paul D tries to forget about his tragic past and his time spent on the chain gang in Alfred because the memories are excruciating to relive. For Paul D, as for Sethe, "The future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. [. . .] Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost [. . .] The hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (42, 58).

For Morrison, however, a process of reclamation is essential. Paul D's refusal to not think about Sixo laughing is dangerous, because Paul D could learn so much from Sixo's means of resistance and struggle for identity. For Morrison, African Americans have no genuine future until the past has been confronted and reclaimed, "The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. [. . .] There is a

necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive."⁶⁵ Morrison says that none of the characters in *Beloved* want to remember, because they are afraid. Beloved, however, as ghost and victim of the tragedy of slavery, represents the slave-past which 'haunts' the novel's characters. She is the past that will not let them go, and 'comes back in other forms.' Sethe and Denver's need to address this unspoken grief in their past quite literally compels them to call Beloved into the flesh, "Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling for the ghost that tried them so. 'Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on'" (4).

Beloved's incarnation in flesh and blood forces each of the characters in turn to confront this painful past. To use Morrison's own term from the novel, Beloved is a rememory they all cannot avoid bumping into. Paul D, however, seeks to avoid the past, locking his memories away in the 'tobacco tin' of his heart, which he explains is rusted shut, "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (113). Paul D begins to tell Sethe about his painful past but then chooses to stop, "He would not pry it [the lid of the tobacco tin buried in his chest] loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of he contents it would shame him" (73). The past for Paul D is unspeakable because of its accompanying shame.

Fittingly, when Paul D first steps into 124 Bluestone Road, his first action is to exorcise the ghost of Beloved--but unsuccessfully, as she later resurrects in the flesh.

Because Paul D seeks to avoid the past rather than learn from it, throughout the story he despises Beloved and seeks to avoid her. Paul D asks Sethe to make Beloved move out, and when she will not cooperate, Paul D himself moves out of the house into the storehouse. Nonetheless, Beloved still makes her way to the shed where she seduces Paul D, which opens his tobacco tin, “He didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin” (117).

Ironically, Paul D urges Sethe to ‘go inside’--explore her emotional interiority and the way the past has affected her-- seemingly without seeing that he needs to explore his own interior life. Paul D tells Sethe, “Go as far inside as you need to, I’ll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. [. . .] We can make a life, girl. A life” (46). Up until that moment, Paul D had decided to stay on the move and love small: “The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (45).

Yet Paul D mistakenly thinks he can make a new life without first facing the ugly stained contents of the tobacco tin in his own heart. In order for Paul D to face the future and obtain the life with Sethe that he desires, he must first confront his own past as well as Sethe’s. Beloved embodies not only the tragic slave-past that both Paul D and Sethe share, but also the dead daughter Sethe murdered--a secret element of Sethe’s past about which Paul D knows nothing. Paul D’s sexual encounter with Beloved signifies this ambivalent and essential encounter with the past. By the novel’s end Paul D himself recognizes this ambivalence, “Afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of

repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (264).

Beloved is thus a highly ambivalent figure in Paul D’s psyche, but on the positive side his sexual encounters with her are necessary for him for several reasons. On the one hand, he must experience intimacy with her because repeatedly confronting the past is the key to his future, the key to his overcoming his fear of loving someone fully and staying put long enough in one place to have a real relationship. On the other hand, Paul D’s encounter with Beloved is frightening and painful, as it symbolizes his betrayal of Sethe as a result of knowledge of her past. Once he sleeps with Beloved, the distance between him and Sethe grows, “Sethe scares me. I scare me. And that girl in her house scares me the most” (234). Not coincidentally, just after Paul D sleeps with Beloved, Stamp Paid forces Paul D to come face to face with Sethe’s past--the knowledge of Beloved, and that Sethe murdered her as a baby. Paul D cannot accept this fact and moves out for good. The encounter with the past has swallowed his hopes for a future, just as Sethe’s obsession with Beloved/the past has made her forget about a future with Paul D. Paul D permits this memory to become destructive as he wields it as a weapon of judgment and criticism of Sethe. As Paul D departs, he, like Schoolteacher, accuses Sethe of being subhuman, and leaves her with the parting words, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (165).

In the criticism of the novel, no moment is more overlooked than the conversation between Paul D and Stamp Paid just before Paul D’s unexpected return to Sethe and Bluestone Road. Even in the film version of *Beloved* which otherwise follows the novel to the letter, the filmmakers chose to omit this strange scene. Why? In this crucial scene,

just prior to his return to Sethe, Paul D laughs. But his laughter bewilders us, because nothing is ostensibly funny. What Paul D jokes about is so horrible as to make one cringe.

Paul D has heard about Sethe's second murder attempt on the day of Beloved's exorcism by the community. Sethe, reliving the past, hallucinates that Denver's new employer Mr. Bodwin is Schoolteacher, and she proceeds to reenact the murders of that fateful day—with one exception. This time around she tries to kill the white man and not her own child. When Paul D hears this news of Sethe's second murder, he laughs at it and says to Stamp Paid:

“Yeah. Damn. That woman is crazy. Crazy.”

“Yeah, well, ain't we all?”

They laughed then. A rusty chuckle at first and then more, louder and louder until Stamp took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his eyes while Paul D pressed the heel of his hand in his own. As the scene neither one had witnessed took shape before them, its seriousness and embarrassment made them shake with laughter.

“Every time a whiteman come to the door she got to kill somebody?”

“For all she know, the man could be coming for the rent.”

“Good thing they don't deliver mail out that way.”

“Wouldn't nobody get no letter.”

“Except the postman.”

“Be a mighty hard message.”

“And his last.”

When their laughter was spent, they took deep breaths and shook their heads. (265)

Almost immediately after laughing at this horror, Paul D returns to Sethe, to stay with her and “put his story next to hers” (273).

Paul D’s laughter shocks and disorients the reader. Nothing seems ‘funny’ in the traditional sense, yet Paul D and Stamp Paid laugh until the tears roll down. In a 1985 interview (notably a year in which Morrison would have been writing *Beloved*), Morrison stated:

Other people call it humor. It’s not really that. It’s not sort of laughing away one’s troubles. And laughter itself for Black people has nothing to do with what’s funny at all. And taking that which is peripheral, or violent or doomed or something that nobody else sees any value in and making value out of it or having a psychological attitude about duress is part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent and irony is a part of that—being able to see the underside of something as well. [. . .] I am conscious of [. . .] how Black people during that time [slavery] apprehend life simply because they didn’t trust anybody else’s version of it.⁶⁶

Paul D’s laughter in this scene seems to fall under Morrison’s characterization of having nothing to do with humor, and more with coping and survival. Paul D and Stamp Paid take that which is violent and valueless and see its ironic, valuable underside. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* Lawrence Levine notes, “The oblique jokes of southern blacks were able to draw humor from the most painful situation. [. . .] [Black laughter. . .] is from the time of slavery on [. . .] essential to black survival and the maintenance of group sanity and integrity.”⁶⁷ Paul D’s laughter, like Sixo’s, captures the

'both-and' paradoxical nature of black consciousness. As such his laughter appears mad, incongruous to those outside the slave experience. African American laughter separates the oppressed from the oppressor, by fostering group solidarity among those with the experiential knowledge necessary to 'get' the joke. According to Levine, laughter fosters group identification and community by widening the gap between those inside and outside the laughter, "Black laughter provided a sense of the total black condition not only by putting whites and their racial system in perspective but also by supplying an important degree of self and group knowledge."⁶⁸ For this reason, to those on the outside, Paul D's laughter makes very little sense at first hearing.

Levine explains,:

A substantial percentage of Negro humor, even had it been revealed to whites, would simply not have struck them as funny. The experiences, the perspective, and the needs of many black Americans so often diverged from those of the majority of white Americans that their humor with its incisive commentary upon reality from the vantage point of black consciousness was not easily comprehensible to whites. [. . .] These fragile jokes [. . .] revealed the [. . .] agonizing difficulty of the black's situation in a way which many white contemporaries would have found difficult to fathom, or *at least difficult to fathom as humor*.⁶⁹

Even today, the complexities of Paul D's laughter make it difficult to interpret.

However, Sixo and Baby Suggs' laughter shed light on Paul D's. Schopenhauer claims that laughter stems from paradox, from the perception of incongruity. To preserve sanity, Paul D must navigate the muddy waters of paradox under which both he and Sethe

as ex-slaves labor. Like Sixo, Paul D's laughs because he encounters paradoxical incongruity. An impossible incongruity exists between the person he knows Sethe to be—a woman who loves her children dearly—and the person slavery has caused her to become—a murderer of her children. Quite literally, Paul D cannot accept that Sethe is the murderess pictured in the newspaper clipping, as revealed in his repetition of the phrase, "That ain't her mouth" (154).

As many have said, although *Beloved* as the resurrection of Sethe's crime haunts the novel's pages, the infinitely more nefarious ghost that the text posits is slavery and its universally haunting legacy. For Paul D, Sethe must be one or the other—either mother or murderess. She cannot kill in order to save. Certainly, white hegemonic thought enforces this either/or distinction, because to acknowledge the situation's tragic circumstance would be tantamount to admitting society's inherent structure creates murderers out of mothers. The whites in the narrative condemn Sethe's choice and imprison her without trial. They exhibit bewilderment at her behavior and repeat the question, "What she go and do that for?" (150) Schoolteacher's nephew even compares himself to Sethe in order to conclude he would never have been capable of such an act, "The woman—something was wrong with her. [. . .] What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he'd been beat a million times and he was white. [. . .] But no beating ever made him...I mean no way he could have...What she go and do that for?" (150) For the whites to acknowledge the situation's ambiguity would be to acknowledge their own complicity in Sethe's rough choice.

Martha Nussbaum explains that what makes a tragic situation or choice genuinely tragic is the fact that there is no right answer, no choice available that does not involve

severe moral wrongdoing. Lawrence Langer, writing on the Holocaust, calls these 'choiceless choices.' Sethe has a choiceless choice: she and her children can live (and be raped, tortured and treated like animals,) or they can die (and be free but no longer alive.) For Sethe, either she takes her own life and children's lives and strikes a blow at the political economy, or she lives as a slave and is allowed no personal liberty. Nussbaum reminds us that Hegel points out the political significance of tragedy: it motivates us to imagine a society structured in such a way that choices between fundamental values and entitlements would be eliminated. Morrison's novel is political through and through. Her tragedy, like all tragedies, is a tale that must be told because it forces us as a society to ask the Hegelian question: Is there a rearrangement of society's structure that could eliminate the tragic choiceless choice?

As we know, the question is not merely fictional. Historically, many slaves committed infanticide, suicide and self-mutilation. We want to slap the facile label of insanity on such actions, because to do so allows us to overlook the systemic evil that is their breeding ground. Systemic evil is banal, whereas moral evil is striking, but only because it makes it easy to point fingers of blame away from ourselves—(we saw this again recently in the post-Katrina media obsession with 'looting,' rather than with the fact that 28% of New Orleans residents not only were starving, but lived in abject poverty even prior to the hurricane.) In my view, the slaves' actions such as suicide and infanticide, while perhaps morally objectionable, nonetheless level an aggressive, terrifying social critique. Sethe's murder of Beloved forces us to ask the tragic question: can we re-structure society so that mothers would not rather kill their children than have them live in it? If the whites in the narrative really answered their own question, "what

she go and do that for,” they would find themselves immersed in cognitive dissonance. For the answer is: because *we* have made of her life a horror. White ideology has set up a tragic either/or decision for Sethe. Yet, whites must realize, as the slaves do, that the dichotomy is artificially inflicted and could be otherwise. Slavery could be eliminated, and human beings would not have to choose between death and death-in-life. The real choice is for a more just society, but it is eclipsed by the people’s self-righteous obsession with Sethe’s individual choice.

Laughter as transformative consciousness

Interpreting the laughter in the narrative thus helps us to interpret Sethe’s action in a more ethically and theologically sophisticated way. The laughter of the oppressed in the story begs us to dispense with the lens of the either/or hegemonic dichotomy, and instead to see the situation’s complexity. We should interpret Sethe’s choice with Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of an ethics of distress, or what we might even call a tragic ethic. The situation is not either/or, either Sethe is a good mother or she is a terrible mother/murderer; in point of fact the situation is ‘both-and.’ Sethe is both a mother who dearly loves her children and the murderer of those very same babies. The paradox is: she does kill her babies in order that they may live. Rationally, this is absurd. Logically, it makes no sense. Language cannot capture such a paradox, but laughter can because it holds the both-and together in the one moment.

When Paul D initially leaves Sethe in horror at her actions, he interprets her murder of Beloved in the exact same manner as white hegemonic thought. In an exact parallel to Schoolteacher who lists Sethe’s animal characteristics, Paul D accuses Sethe of being an animal, and behaving as if she has ‘four feet, not two.’ Yet Paul D must reclaim his past

and have his own interpretation of Sethe's actions, rather than merely echoing the sentiment of the white dominant consciousness. Paul D at this point fails to have the independent consciousness exhibited by both Sixo and the early Baby Suggs. His later laughter signals his new ownership of his black consciousness.

Morrison reveals this about Paul D through the subtle issue of his name. The name Paul D is clearly a generic bill-of-sale name given from the slaveowners. He and the other men with him have no individual personhood in the eyes of the whites; hence, they are all named Paul—Paul A, Paul B, and so on. But more importantly, in spite of the fact that Paul D has been gone from Sweet Home for several decades, when he arrives at Bluestone Road Denver addresses him as Mr. D. Paul D corrects the girl and says, “Garner, baby. Paul D Garner.” Delores Williams explains, “Some ex-slaves kept the names they had because, in freedom, they wanted to indicate that they had been ‘raised’ by quality white folk during slavery.”⁷⁰ Paul D is not to blame for this identity crisis, as Major Jones explains, “A part of the black man's identity problem lies in the fact that he has not been too sure who he was at any given moment. [. . .] A part of the dehumanizing process was to strip him of his original sense of personhood. [. . .] His self-identity was to be related to that of his master. [. . .] He was never sure of himself. [. . .] He bore no name of his own; he had acquired the name of his master.”⁷¹ Yet Paul D must come to realize that by keeping the name Garner, he still allows himself to be defined, rather than strive for self-definition.

Right after Paul D laughs at Sethe's crime and just before he returns to Sethe, Paul D runs into Denver again. In spite of having been corrected the last time, Denver greets Paul D with the exact same words, “Good morning, Mr. D.” But this time Paul D does

not correct her, and merely answers, “Well, it is now” (266). Most critical literature overlooks this small but significant moment. Paul D always believed he was a man because Mr. Garner raised good slaves. He believed he was a valuable person because Mr. Garner said so. But Paul D begins to realize that the name Garner still signifies oppression, “Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman?”⁷² Through the character of Paul D, therefore Morrison’s narrative exposes the lie of benevolent slavery. Unleashing the contents of his own tobacco tin, Paul D goes through the following thought process:

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 by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much 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? That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not. It troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point. [. . .] Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away. Would they have run then? [. . .] Why did the brothers need the one whole night to decide? To discuss whether they would join Sixo and Halle. Because they had been isolated in a wonderful lie, [. . .] ignorant of or amused by Sixo’s dark stories. (220-1)

In truth, Paul D is inherently worthy of life and freedom, and not because Mr. Garner says so. Before Paul D achieved an independent consciousness, he allowed shame to

overcome him. Whites see him as shameful and so he feels shame. Understandably Paul D for most of his life appropriated hegemonic thought as his own thought. Traci West notes that the shame that victims of violence experience is itself “a powerful covert weapon of domination;” as a result blacks need to struggle “against the colonizing process which teaches us forms of self-hatred.”⁷³

Paul D struggles throughout the narrative to rid himself of this shame and its accompanying shame that is oppression’s hangover. Hopkins says that the most sinister scheme of the oppressor is to convince the oppressed that the oppressor’s voice and interests are the same as the oppressed’s. The results of such an internalization have tragic consequences. But fortunately, one Paul D emancipates himself from the oppressive consciousness of black blame, he comes to realize that he is not to blame for his past, nor is Sethe unambiguously to blame for hers. In the words of Audre Lorde, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep in each of us.”⁷⁴

Paul D’s release of the name Garner means he has at last triumphed over that piece of the oppressor he has internalized. Paul D reclaims and accepts both his and Sethe’s painful past, which prepares him to move ahead to a future. Laughing at the oppression has helped Paul D achieve this emancipation, for Hopkins notes:

Joking fosters a leveling of the apparent omnipotence of the monopolizers of divine creation. When the exploiter is laughed at, he or she can be better seen as just another human being and not some type of demi-god to be feared sheepishly and automatically by the least in society. The very process of laughing [. . .] helps to

alleviate the insanity of being victimized by abuse. Thus one continues down the path of co-constituting the new self.⁷⁵

Not coincidentally, Paul D liberates himself from the pain of the past at the same time the community exorcizes Beloved from 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved's exorcism therefore at least in part symbolizes Paul D's transformation in consciousness. Delores Williams explains that a transformation of consciousness is when oppressed people arrive at self or group identity through a newly-acquired awareness of self worth and appreciation of their own community. Paul D's laughter symbolizes that this transformation of consciousness has transpired—previously he could only wish that he could laugh along with Sixo. Confused about his identity, Paul D previously could not share in Sixo's emotional and psychological liberation and resistance. But once he is free enough in his mind to laugh at oppression and its absurd repercussions, Paul D is empowered and liberated from his former days of being a walking man with a tobacco tin heart. Paul D's laughter thus signifies that a certain *metanoia*, or conversion, has occurred in his thought and psyche. Writes Hopkins, "To be free calls for the oppressed to think they are free. [. . .] Part of preparing for this struggle and participating in it demands a radical *metanoia* (or conversion) of the thought processes of those at the bottom of society. One of the greatest chains with which oppression enslaves the oppressed is the chain around the *mind* of the marginalized."⁷⁶

Kenneth Burke explains that a purpose of humor is to attain maximum consciousness, both of self and of others. Humor enables us to grow in self-awareness. With his 'humor,' Paul D emancipates himself from the chains of the dominant consciousness. Cone remarks, "For the slaves, their consciousness is defined by masters and rulers. [. . .]

The victims of such attitudes have only two alternatives: 1) to accept the oppressors' value system and thus be contented with the place set for them by others or 2) to find a completely new way of looking at reality that enables them to fight against oppression."⁷⁷ For Paul D, the lens of risibility enables him to construe another reality with a self-defined consciousness.

Paul D's joking about the system which has turned the kind-hearted Sethe into a monster who would kill anyone white who entered her sphere of vision, including her own mailman, articulates a criticism against such a system. Previously, Paul D misdirected this critique and unwittingly appropriated the white consciousness by accusing Sethe of having 'two feet not four,' the very same dehumanizing characteristic Schoolteacher had ascribed to her. Once Paul D laughs and returns to Sethe, however, we see that he has jettisoned his internalized perception of Sethe as animal-like in her murder, thereby abandoning the white consciousness. In the end, Sethe asks Paul D if he has come back to her to 'count her feet;' Paul D replies, "Rub your feet" (272).

With a laugh, Paul D takes his judgment and anger toward Sethe and redirects it toward white society. This redirection exactly parallels Sethe's attempt to stab the white man rather than her own child the second time around. Henri Bergson argues that laughter is inversionary, that is, it trivializes or degrades "ideas and personages normally held to be lofty or noble, and the advancement of those normally consigned to an inferior or inconsequential position."⁷⁸ While the dominant consciousness degrades Sethe, laughter turns this thought on its head. Paul D's laughter unmasks the system as absurd, as laughable.

Freud explains, “Tendentious jokes are especially favored in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.”⁷⁹ Paul D’s laughter interrupts the system of oppression. It strikes a blow at the status quo by rebelling against its absurdity. More importantly, it liberates Paul D from his own shame which enables him to return to the woman he loves without judging her in the same way he has judged himself for so long. To quote Levine, Paul D’s unexpected joke illustrates the ethical resistance in African American humor:

Jokes about [. . .] forms of racial violence illustrate [that...] humor [. . .] is not resigned; it is rebellious and signifies the victory of the ego which refuses to be hurt by the arrow of adversity and instead attempts to become impervious to the wounds dealt it by the outside world. [In black humor...] the outer world was reduced to pygmy proportions, the situation was dwarfed, and the joke-tellers and their audiences were allowed to set aside, or at least to minimize, the pain and defeat imposed upon them by the external world.⁸⁰

In short, Paul D’s laughter frees him for a future his oppressors sought to deny him.

In the end, Paul D finds genuine liberation, the kind that Sixo and Baby Suggs experienced only proleptically. Along the way to liberation and freedom, Paul D follows the ‘tree flowers’ in order to find his way north. Throughout the story, Morrison uses the trope of flowers to symbolically represent the flourishing of this incongruous form of protesting hope, which can lead to survival. Baby Suggs, for example, puts flowers in her hat that dark day Schoolteacher comes for Sethe: “She cut through a stalk of insistent rue. Its flowers she stuck through a split in her hat” (138). Another name for rue,

interestingly, is ‘herb of grace,’ and grace for Baby was a sign of a protesting hope’s flourishing. Sethe, at Sweet Home, similarly brought a fistful of flowers into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen everyday, “just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, to take the ugly out of it” (22). And finally, the dead child Beloved asks her sister Denver “Are there flowers in the dark?” (121).

A belief that flowers can grow in the dark is irrational, impossible, absurd; much as Baby Suggs’, Sixo’s and Paul D’s faith in liberation in the midst of enslavement and horror is paradoxical, irrational, and absurd. Surely, both beliefs are laughable to many. However, the text tells us Beloved’s question is rightly answered in the affirmative—flowers do bloom in the dark, Denver “adds sticks to the stovefire and assures her there are.” And Paul D, having followed the flowers along his twisted path to freedom, returns finally to Sethe and 124, only to be “amazed by the riot of late-summer flowers” (121). Throughout the narrative, laughter testifies to the existence of such flowers, even though they are not yet fully allowed into the light. When Paul D laughs and returns to Sethe, it is because he rediscovers the possibility of a future.

In conclusion, Paul D, much like Gavriel and Rodrigues, endures the paradox of existence by allowing the narrative of slavery’s past tragedy to remain in conflict and unresolved tension with the narrative of future hope. In what we can interpret as a final act of resistance, perhaps the most poignant of the novel, Paul D asks for Sethe’s permission to place his ‘story next to hers.’ Laughter seems to have shown Paul D that one cannot reconcile the narratives of memory and hope, nor does one need to do so in order to survive. When Sethe thinks that Paul D wants her to choose between Denver and him—i.e. choose between past and future narratives, Paul D responds, “I’m not

asking you to choose. [. . .] It's not about choosing somebody over her—it's making space for somebody along with her" (45). Morrison, like Wiesel, seems to suggest that for some horrors, no genuine answer is possible. Also like Wiesel, however, she suggests that creating a space for the juxtaposition of narratives opens up the possibility of an in-spite-of future.

What is possible, in other words, is Paul D's proposal that Paul D and Sethe not only juxtapose their past and future narratives, but also that they juxtapose each of their respective narratives, one with another. Paul D knows that the future, however hopeful, can never negate the past. But in contrast to Baby Suggs, he also affirms that the past should equally never negate the possibility of a future, "'Sethe,' he says, 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow' (273). Paul D thus leaves us with a strange twist on Surin: love *intentionally* takes the disparate narratives of two people--narratives often in conflict and ravaged by contingency--and simultaneously affirms the identity and integrity of both, without prioritizing one over the other.

Morrison's novel reminds us that where there is rupture and pain, love can still create solidarity and beauty without negating or denying rupture. Wiesel and Endo both share Morrison's implicit conclusion that a juxtaposition of narratives shares the burden of suffering, even if this suffering remains unredeemed and inexplicable. Endo writes that Rodrigues, who has juxtaposed his narrative with both Kichijiro's and Christ's, discovers that a "sense of suffering shared softly eased his heart and mind more than the sweetest water."⁸¹ Similarly, Wiesel writes in *Gates*, "You say, 'I'm alone.' Some one answers, 'I'm alone too.' [. . .] A bridge is thrown between the two abysses. [. . .] We are alone, yes, but inside this solitude we are brothers."⁸² In the end, all three authors redefine love

as a resistant mode-of-being that juxtaposes another person's narrative, however shattered and broken, alongside one's own and refuses to let go. Christian theology and ethics, as they struggle to make agape and social justice real in the real world of conflicting narratives, should heed these insightful authors' injunction to listen to one another, to affirm the integrity of other people's narratives, and to place these narratives next to our own. The laughter of the oppressed cries hear us! Hear our stories! Do we hear?

Notes

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- ¹ I am grateful to James Cone, who pointed out to me this significant quote from Malcolm X in Peter Goldman, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973) 24-25.
- ² Quoted in Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998) 98.
- ³ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) 213, 212.
- ⁴ Dwight Hopkins and George Cummings, eds., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991) 152.
- ⁵ See Dwight Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000).
- ⁶ Hopkins and Cummings 41.
- ⁷ Hopkins 138.
- ⁸ See Delores Williams, *Sisters of the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).
- ⁹ Patrick Bascio, *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 67.
- ¹⁰ Hopkins and Cummings 31.
- ¹¹ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 12-13.
- ¹² James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1972) 16,33.
- ¹³ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975) 2,5.
- ¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin, 1966) 144.
- ¹⁵ Nietzsche 315.
- ¹⁶ *A Black Theology of Liberation* 15.
- ¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 1991) 5, 28.
- ¹⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 105.
- ¹⁹ Hill Collins 26.
- ²⁰ *The Spirituals and the Blues* 90-1.
- ²¹ *The Spirituals and the Blues* 5.
- ²² Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995) 76, 82.
- ²³ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1994) 8.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Bascio, 120.
- ²⁵ Kenneth Surin, "Taking Suffering Seriously," *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1992) 344.
- ²⁶ *The Spirituals and the Blues* 135.
- ²⁷ *The Spirituals and the Blues* 68.
- ²⁸ *Down, Up and Over* 3.
- ²⁹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) x-xi.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Hill Collins 69, 34.
- ³¹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If it Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001) 144.
- ³² Hopkins and Cummings 37.
- ³³ Taylor-Guthrie 126.
- ³⁴ *The Spirituals and the Blues* 26.
- ³⁵ Hill Collins 227.
- ³⁶ *Theology of Play* 14.
- ³⁷ Susan Corey, "The Religious Dimensions of the Grotesque in Literature: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in James Luther Adams and William Yates, eds., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 229.

- ³⁸ Taylor-Guthrie 180.
- ³⁹ *A Black Theology of Liberation* 16.
- ⁴⁰ Corey 229, 230.
- ⁴¹ John Morreal, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987) 52-54,55.
- ⁴² Quoted in Goldman 24-25.
- ⁴³ Major Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 65.
- ⁴⁴ *Spirituals and the Blues* 21.
- ⁴⁵ Hill Collins 68.
- ⁴⁶ Hill Collins 68.
- ⁴⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 1991) 225.
- ⁴⁸ Elie Wiesel states, "Ambiguity is the name of our sickness, of everybody's sickness. What are we looking for in life, in existence, in history, in our own being? For the One to do away with ambiguity." See Harry James Cargas, *In Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) 18.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in *The Black Christ* 59.
- ⁵⁰ *A Black Theology of Liberation* 11.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in *A Black Theology of Liberation* 88.
- ⁵² Taylor-Guthrie 19.
- ⁵³ Taylor-Guthrie 235.
- ⁵⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters and their Struggle with Melancholy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1978) 123.
- ⁵⁵ Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boscher-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press, 1962) 95.
- ⁵⁶ Quoted in Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 20.
- ⁵⁷ *God of the Oppressed* 13.
- ⁵⁸ *Down, Up and Over* 256.
- ⁵⁹ Quoted in *Down, Up and Over* 271.
- ⁶⁰ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 151.
- ⁶¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1965) 20-21.
- ⁶² *Spirituals and the Blues* 24.
- ⁶³ *Down, Up and Over* 128.
- ⁶⁴ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993)136.
- ⁶⁵ Taylor-Guthrie 241,247.
- ⁶⁶ Taylor-Guthrie 175.
- ⁶⁷ Levine 314, 338.
- ⁶⁸ Levine 320. See also 359.
- ⁶⁹ Levine 313, italics mine.
- ⁷⁰ Williams 76.
- ⁷¹ Jones 63-4.
- ⁷² *Beloved* 125.
- ⁷³ Traci West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) 75.
- ⁷⁴ Quoted in Hill Collins 229.
- ⁷⁵ Hopkins 255.
- ⁷⁶ *Down, Up and Over* 246.
- ⁷⁷ *God of the Oppressed* 33.
- ⁷⁸ Quoted in Levine 300.
- ⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960) 125.
- ⁸⁰ Levine 343.
- ⁸¹ Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1980) 99.

⁸² Wiesel 177, 193.