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The Black Look and ‘the Spectacle of Whitefolks’

Wildness in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

“Freaky,” said Milkman. “Some freaky shit.”

“Freaky world,” said Guitar. “A freaky, fucked-up world.”

—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*¹

Few readers of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) recall that early in the novel Sethe, Denver, and Paul D visit a carnival freak show. The Black customers approach the fairgrounds “breathless with the excitement of seeing whitepeople loose: doing magic, clowning, without heads or with two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton, completely tattooed, eating glass, swallowing fire, spitting ribbons, twisted into knots, forming pyramids, playing with snakes and beating each other up.” These loose “whitepeople” are the carnival’s main attraction, freaks who boast feats of strength and agility, amazing extremes of shape and size, and bodies that press at the very boundaries of the human.

All too soon, this compelling description is revealed as the fickle promise of a publicity agent. But the carnival’s failure to live up to the wonders anticipated by its advertising, and the obvious racism of its employees, are of little consequence for the Black visitors determined to enjoy its pleasures: “the barker called their children names (‘Pickaninnies free!’) but the food on his vest and the hole in his pants rendered it fairly harmless. In any case it was a small price to pay for the fun they might not ever have again. Two pennies and an insult were well spent if it meant seeing the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves.” Enduring the insults of a resentful carnival staff, the Black spectators delight

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in the unprecedented sight of white performers on display for their entertainment. For once, instead of being the object of surveillance, the Black fairgoer is a member of the audience who has paid to point and stare at the “spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves.” Despite the performers’ hostility—“One-Ton Lady spit at them” and “Arabian Nights Dancer cut her performance to three minutes instead of the usual fifteen she normally did”—or perhaps because of it, the Black audience draws together, a sense of community reinforced through their perceived differences from the freaks onstage.

Paul D takes particular enjoyment in the experience of carnival. An ideal consumer, he buys candy for Sethe and Denver and gawks at the freaks’ spectacular bodies.² But his credulity reaches its limits when he confronts an ordinary Black man playing the part of a Wild African Savage. Otherwise willing to suspend his disbelief, Paul D vehemently rejects the conventions of spectatorship that should govern his reception of the show: “When Wild African Savage shook his bars and said wa, wa, Paul D told everybody he knew him back in Roanoke.”³ It is not surprising that the only Black person in the troupe is masquerading as a Wild African Savage, the role of dangerous exotic predictably assigned to nonwhite carnies. By claiming familiarity with this man, who is not from savage Africa but Roanoke, Paul D disrupts the fiction of his absolute alterity and the apparently solid boundary between spectator and performer.

This richly evocative confrontation was diffused when *Beloved* was made into a film (Oprah Winfrey, 1999) that faithfully reproduces the dialogue but in so muted a form that its significance is lost. Amid the noise of the crowd, Paul D’s words are reduced to a lighthearted aside rather than a powerful intervention in the fairgoers’ enjoyment of the spectacle. The carnival scene has been treated with similar neglect in the extensive body of criticism devoted to Morrison’s fiction. This chapter will argue that it provides an important key to understanding *Beloved*. As Morrison once remarked, her fiction is intended to provide “the kind of information you can find between the lines of history. . . . It’s right there in the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names.”⁴ In what follows, I read *Beloved* as a novel that gives voice to stories about the freak show that otherwise lurk “between the lines of history.” When Paul D locates the Wild African Savage within a familiar context, he translates the institution of human exhibition into something of personal consequence for each member of the community. The freak show’s treatment of race—the combination of ex-

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otic costuming and pseudoscientific ballyhoo—might seem so obvious that it virtually goes without saying. If the Black man masquerading as a Wild African Savage is such a crude and self-evident manifestation of racial stereotyping that it hardly needs interpretation, the reaction of audiences to such performances is less easily explained.

Paul D's response to the spectacle has numerous counterparts in memoirs and legends about carnival life. This chapter will consider a number of historical analogues to the encounter fictionalized in *Beloved*, in which the Wild Man's act is disrupted by the unruly behavior of audience members. Analysis of these interruptions provides an alternative perspective on the portrait of freak shows that has emerged in preceding chapters, for it shifts the focus from an interpretation of their content to an interpretation of their reception. The interruption draws attention to the role of spectators, who did not simply absorb the tableaux of bodies exhibited before them but responded actively to what they were seeing. Historical evidence about spectatorship reveals that freak shows offered a particularly unconvincing form of racial performance; that, when it came to wild men and savage tribes, audiences rarely seem to have believed what they saw. Indeed, in the age of the confidence man epitomized by Barnum's maxim, "A sucker is born every minute," it appears that one of the primary pleasures of viewing a racial exhibit was to disclose its fraudulence.⁵ Spectators' desire to unmask the racial freak as a hoax did not mean that they questioned the exhibit's underlying assumption of white supremacy, but their reactions betray that, in their eyes, the natives of Africa or Asia assumed a dubious status akin to that of Martians, mermaids, or missing links. Even when the exotics were what they claimed to be—Igorots from the Philippines, African pygmies, Ubangi women—they were subject to impudent prodding by customers who had to touch to believe. For an audience composed of African Americans who bore the burden of such racial stereotypes, the delight of revelation was magnified, for it was a moment when, catching white showmen in the act, they could briefly seize control of representation.

This is the information "between the lines of history" that Morrison summons up in her scene of carnivalesque reversal and unmasking, which occurs immediately before the mysterious *Beloved's* appearance and is of great consequence to the events that follow. The episode, in which the collective identity of the spectators is broken down and re-configured, becomes a paradigm for the narrative's broader concern with the difficulty of forming alliances among persons who have endured intense suffering. As the audience of ex-slaves at the freak show

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draws together, it reveals a troubling aspect of communities that have the potential to heal but rely on the exclusion of even more marginalized others in order to identify as a group.

Under Morrison's pen, Paul D's meeting with the Wild African Savage unmask the pernicious fiction of racist stereotypes but not of race itself. Ultimately, the arsenal for collective healing is stored as a form of racial memory transmitted bodily from one generation to the next. Like freaks, Morrison's characters are defined entirely in corporeal terms; emotions are projected outward onto the contours of their bodies, which are so often scarred, wounded, or disabled. Ancestral traumas pulsate in the blood of their offspring, and memories materialize as memories so concrete a person can bump into them.⁶ Morrison's preoccupation with physicality is distinct from the positions articulated in act 2, where freaks are evidence of a common humanity that transcends superficial differences between spectators and the unfortunate figures onstage. Instead, the body becomes a foundation for the formation of communal bonds and the exclusion of outsiders. If Morrison disputes the false opposition between freak and normal, she insists on other intractable differences: race enables the Black spectator to identify with the Wild African Savage, and race precludes identification with the other freaks. *Beloved* ends by denying that those who bear the legacy of slavery in their bodies could unite with those who do not on the basis of a mutual humanity. The sideshow freak, whose properties are soon transferred onto the freakish *Beloved*, is a figure for the impossibility of that union.

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Paul D's spirited interruption of the freak show is a fictional rendition of numerous historical accounts in which a wild man's act is stopped short by the antics of an unruly spectator. The episode, as Morrison describes it, draws attention to the contours of the racial freak's performance and reception as they occurred in the past; in turn, a sustained consideration of historical evidence offers insight about the scene's significance to the novel. The wild man was a stock sideshow personality, along with other common types such as fat ladies, tattooed people, giants, and midgets. During the period of their greatest popularity, freak shows consistently trafficked in representations of non-Western races that combined anthropology and entertainment, pseudoscientific jargon, and fantastic hyperbole. In doing so, they offered simplified answers to the pressing

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concerns about race that would have provoked their predominantly white audiences, already anxious about the consequences of slavery and its aftermath, great waves of seemingly unassimilable immigrants, and imperial expansion.⁷ As James W. Cook Jr. writes of Barnum's famous "What Is It?" the "scientific" questions raised by an African American man advertised as a missing link "quickly spilled over into even more controversial questions of racial definition, politics, and property."⁸ Freak-show savages equated race with a monstrous deviance made clearly legible on the surfaces of the body. The interior of the tent or dime museum mapped the differences between freak and normal in concrete spatial terms: the physical separation between the onlooker and the living tableaux on the exhibition platform announced itself as a vast, existential divide between spectacularly individuated deviance and the comfortable anonymity of normalcy. As the Black body was transformed into a hyper-visible spectacle, the audience aspired to blend together into a transparent, homogenous whiteness. Those most anxious about their own status as citizens applauded the reassuring vision of nonwhite bodies that absolutely could not be assimilated.⁹

Indeed, whether foolish and docile or wild with rage and bloodlust, the unassimilability of the dark-skinned body was the dominant message conveyed by the racial freak. I use the terms "racial freak" and "wild man" interchangeably to refer to a particular kind of exhibition that linked the spectacle of ferocious wildness to racial and national differences. As W. C. Thompson explained in his 1905 memoir, *On the Road with a Circus*, "the original circus wild man, the denizen of Borneo, was white, but his successors have almost invariably had dark skins."¹⁰ The predictability of such connections between wildness and dark skin was confirmed by journalist Scott Hart, who noted in 1946 that "most Wild men from Borneo are amiable Negro boys from about the circus lot who are trained to growl, flash a set of fake tusks and eat raw meat. . . . The Wild Man is always from Borneo. The Bear Woman is from the darkest wilds of Africa. The Pin-headed Man is from the jungle-ridden regions of Somewhere."¹¹ The formulaic print "ethnographies" that often accompanied these exhibits associated wildness with remote geographical locales. A pamphlet on Waino and Plutano, the Wild Men of Borneo, for example, informed the reader, "Borneo is an island so large that England, Ireland, and Scotland might be set down in the middle of it. The interior of this vast island is a dense forest, inhabited by a race of humanity very little different from the animal creation."¹² Couched in pedagogical terms, such explanatory narratives perpetuated commonly held assumptions about the physical and cultural otherness of non-Western and nonwhite people.

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In contrast to the presentation of physically disabled freaks, who might answer questions, lecture the audience about their unusual bodies, or demonstrate their capacity to perform everyday activities, the wild man was deliberately inarticulate, his snarls and roars a sign of his absolute inability to communicate through language. "I was all stripped 'cept around the middle and wore a claw necklace; had to make out as if I couldn't talk. 'Twas mighty tiresome to howl and grin all day," recalled a former wild man quoted in Thompson's memoir.¹³ Sometimes eating raw meat, biting the heads off live animals, or drinking blood, the wild man's voracious and indiscriminate appetites attested to his preference for the raw to the cooked. Often described in terms of popular evolutionary science as a "missing link," the wild man was said to come from a lost species located somewhere on the developmental chain between human and beast. While such acts were a regular part of low-budget traveling carnivals like the one described in *Beloved*, they were equally popular in more reputable venues such as world's fairs and museums. There, they were greeted with interest by scientific professionals and respectable citizens such as the lawyer George Templeton Strong, who noted in his diary in 1860 that he had "stopped at Barnum's on my way downtown to see the much advertised nondescript, the 'What-is-it.'"¹⁴ In short, while the venue and tenor of the performance might vary, the exhibition of nonwhite persons as wild men, cannibals, and missing links was an acceptable source of entertainment and knowledge for spectators across the social spectrum.

Authenticity was always an important part of the freak show's promotional rhetoric, which advertised exhibits as LIVE! TRUE! REAL! GENUINE! Despite such hyperbolic claims of veracity, the exotic act was the most easily and regularly fabricated of all attractions. More often than not, those advertised as Zulu warriors, Wild Men from Borneo, and Dahomeans were actually people of color from local urban centers.¹⁵ As William C. Fitzgerald noted in an 1897 article on sideshows, "Certainly it is far easier and cheaper to engage and 'fit-up' as the 'Cuban Wonder' an astute individual from the New York slums, than to send costly missions to the Pearl of the Antilles in search of human curiosities."¹⁶ The memoirs of former sideshow managers and employees are unapologetic about the fabrication of ethnographic freaks. Indeed, the creation of a wild man is a recurrent chapter in the formulaic genre of the carnival memoir. Hart tells the following story.

On a platform before the tent a tense, narrow-cheeked man related how the unfortunate individual from Borneo knew the

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whereabouts of neither father, mother, nor home, and that five thousand dollars would be paid anyone providing such information.

Inside the tent, a fat rural woman said, "Oh, ain't that awful!" A child asked, "You reckon he can get out?" But when dinnertime came, the Wild Man was taken to meet a distinguished local circus fan and his wife. In the ensuing pleasantries, he created a very happy social impression.

With professional awareness, however, the Wild Man failed to mention that he came from South Carolina.¹⁷

Hart's anecdote exploits the discrepancy between the talker's deliberately mystified rhetoric and the mundane, but quite respectable, activities of the Wild Man upon leaving the display platform. Others are less sanguine about the arrangement between performers and their managers. Thompson describes the career of Calvin Bird, "a negro who hailed from Pearson, GA [who] toured most of the country, mystifying all who saw him and sending them away impressed with a conviction that he was all he was represented to be. Not until he appeared at a Syracuse hospital with a request that his horns be removed was the secret of his unnatural appearance disclosed. Under his scalp was found inserted a silver plate, in which stood two standards. In these, when he was on exhibition, Bird screwed two goat horns."¹⁸ In contrast to the comfortable arrangement between Hart's wild man and his promoters, Bird suffered bodily harm for the sake of his act. Far from demonstrating that he was a missing link, this elaborate ruse proved the wild man to be all too human, the victim of abusive surgeons and greedy showmen. Illustrating his remark that "the life of the professional wild man is an unhappy one at best," Thompson adds the story of a Black man from Baltimore who ran out of money while visiting Berlin and "enlisted as an untamed arrival from Africa with a small American circus then playing abroad. He endured the torture he was compelled to undergo for a month and then stole away to a hospital."¹⁹ There he recuperated from the forced diet of raw horse meat and blood and the chill of performing during cold weather dressed only in a loincloth.²⁰

Such anecdotal evidence bespeaks the pragmatic, and often cruel, opportunism of sideshow managers, who cared far less about the authenticity promised in their advertising than the lucrative consequences of maintaining a steady supply of unique and varied attractions. Accounts of their fraudulence are numerous and unsurprising: after all, it was the showman's job to create illusions that amused and deceived his

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customers, and the wild man conformed to prevailing beliefs about racial inferiority. The standard was set by Barnum, who began his career by exhibiting a racial freak, the elderly, disabled slave named Joice Heth who claimed to be the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington. A Black woman whose body was contorted with age and years of hard labor was easily transformed into a sensation through Barnum's skillful publicity campaign. When an autopsy following Heth's death revealed her to be no more than eighty, Barnum deflected controversy by professing himself the victim of a hoax devised by Heth and her former owners.²¹ Barnum's autobiographical writings provide different and somewhat contradictory accounts of these events, but they are consistently uninterested in proving that Heth was what she claimed to be. In some versions, Barnum conspires with Heth to deceive the public, while in others he is innocent, but in each version he establishes humbug as the rule rather than the exception in the showman's trade.²²

These examples attest to the performative gap between Black actor and stage persona, but also to the frequency with which that disjuncture recurred in narratives about the freak show. As I have argued, the freak show's theatrical conventions induct actors and audiences into a carefully orchestrated relationship, albeit one that was frequently violated by misbehavior on both sides of the velvet rope.²³ In *Beloved*, the ex-slaves experience the carnival, with its "spectacle of whitefolks," as a temporary release from their more ordinary interactions with the white citizens of Cincinnati. The freaks, in turn, feel little obligation to behave professionally when they confront an audience that they deem inferior. The performers' crude disdain is met by the customers' rude jeers and laughter. Facing off in a venue where rowdy, indecorous behavior is the norm, spectators and performers apparently feel free to modulate their behavior in response to one another, allowing for the open exchange of hostilities between marginalized groups.

The festive, unrestrained atmosphere of carnival often gave rise to the kind of disruptive misbehavior that Morrison describes. While it is not particularly surprising to find that racial freaks were local people of color tricked out in costume, more striking is the evidence that *audiences* seemed so rarely to believe what they saw. For instance, having viewed the "What Is It?" at Barnum's Museum, Strong opined, "Some say it's an advanced chimpanzee, others that it's a cross between nigger and baboon. But it seems to me clearly an idiotic negro dwarf, raised, perhaps, in Alabama or Virginia. The showman's story of capture (with three other specimens that died) by a party in pursuit of the gorilla on the western coast of Africa is probably bosh."²⁴ Strong asserts his own

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capacity to distinguish between “bosh” and authenticity from the speculations of other observers and the showman’s fantastic account of peril and adventure. As the episode from *Beloved* suggests, even Paul D—a customer determined to enjoy the pleasures of carnival—questions the implausible spectacle of a Black man performing as an African savage. Such moments of resistance are to be found across diverse groups of patrons, but the most powerful accounts are of the kind Morrison describes, in which a Black spectator looks with suspicion and disbelief at a racist performance, refuses to enter into its fiction, and loudly enjoins the audience into collective incredulity. In his 1913 biography, circus veteran George Middleton offers a neat parallel to Paul D’s encounter with the Wild African savage.

In the side show we have a big negro whom we had fitted up with rings in his nose, a leopard skin, some assagais and a large shield made out of cows’ skin. While he was sitting on stage in the side show, along came two negro women and remarked, “See that nigger over there? He ain’t no Zulu, that’s Bill Jackson. He worked over here at Camden on the dock. I seen that nigger often.” Poor old Bill Jackson was as uneasy as if he was sitting on needles, holding the shield between him and the two negro women.²⁵

Like Paul D, the women in Middleton’s anecdote disrupt the exhibition, shattering the fourth wall by speaking directly to the stage. The interpellative gesture of recognition—“I know you!”—dispels the illusion of the wild man’s absolute alterity, relocating him within the community of onlookers. Instead of a Zulu, he is Bill Jackson; rather than hailing from Africa, he is a dockworker from New Jersey. The account derives its humor from the transformation of the shield intended as a sign of tribal savagery into a barrier to protect the guilty man from the female customers he was supposed to terrorize.

Such examples require us to turn from an analysis of the *content* of freak exhibition to questions of *spectatorship*. The racism of wild men and cannibal acts is crude and obvious, but why were audiences so ready to interrupt these performances? Theories of cinematic reception help to explain the shifting and unpredictable relationship between the spectator and the visual image.²⁶ Eric Lott has productively applied these insights to an analysis of minstrelsy, where he describes the experience of cinema as “a destabilized structure of fascination, a continual confusion of subject and object” in which “we successively identify,

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across gender lines, with logical screen representatives of ourselves (heroes, victims), then with seeming adversaries (villains, killers), and so on."²⁷ Like a film narrative, the freak show implicitly situated the viewer in a particular relationship to its content; however, the response of actual spectators did not always conform to structural expectations.²⁸ The Black fairgoer faced problems of identification akin to those of the Black film viewer: confronted by representations of African Americans ranging from the uninteresting to the degrading, she had to identify across racial boundaries or forgo the visual pleasures of identification altogether.

Film theory is a useful point of entry for understanding the shifting contours of reception, for it provides the most sustained consideration of the random ways in which any given spectator will identify with, repudiate, or otherwise respond to narrative cinema. Yet such theories have only limited ability to account for live performance. In the scenes I have described, the flash of identificatory insight is followed by a cry that utterly disrupts the action taking place onstage and invites the audience to join in a ritual of communal disbelief. It is impossible for the wild man to continue beyond the moment of recognition, for his act depends on the illusion of his absolute inscrutability. Only during a live encounter can the viewer's response register with and alter the course of the dramatic action. In fact, an important ingredient in the audience's enjoyment of freak shows seems to have been precisely this capacity to deconstruct the visual evidence presented to them. Interruption, misidentification, and the possibility of fraudulence contributed considerably to the show's appeal.

The pleasures of unmasking are part of a broader nineteenth-century preoccupation with the figure of the confidence man, whose reliance on trickery and deception was the unsavoury counterpart to the Horatio Alger story of legitimate success gained through hard work and ingenuity. Neil Harris attributes P. T. Barnum's success with hoaxes to a public that appreciated "the sheer exhilaration of debate, the utter fun of the opportunity to learn and evaluate, whether the subject was an ancient slave, an exotic mermaid, or a politician's honor. Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of intellectual exercise, stimulating even when the truth could not be determined."²⁹ Ferreting out deception at the freak show doubtless filled audiences with satisfaction in their ability to distinguish between a scam and the real thing. George Templeton Strong takes manifest pride in recognizing the What Is It? as an ordinary African American and not a missing link. But the particular scenes of recognition that concern me deal more specifically with racial boundaries and identifications *among*

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African Americans, who were both viewers and performers. An audience of ex-slaves contemplating the spectacle of a Black man performing as an African savage would have a particularly savvy understanding of the slippery nature of theatrical representation. To hail the savage as "one of us" was a dangerous move because it threatened to equate the African Americans with the barbarism of Africa, but to stop the savage in his tracks gave the lie to that equation, demonstrating the power of the Black look.

In the context of *Beloved*, the moment of recognition is significant because it anticipates the novel's attempt to reverse the terms of slavery, shifting attention from the spectacle of the oppressed Black body to a Black viewer whose gaze implicates "whitefolks" as the architects of that peculiar institution. Assuming the interchangeability of one dark-skinned person for another, the freak show represents the Black body as inherently readable in terms of primitive exoticism. At the same time, it undercuts this assumption by acknowledging that the wild man is only readable as "wild" through an elaborate combination of costume and performance. Invoking the same stereotypes that made the Wild African Savage at the freak show possible, Stamp Paid reflects, "Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift, unnavigable waters, swinging, screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood" (198). The same logic that associates all Black bodies with the bestiality of the jungle allows a man from Virginia to masquerade as a savage in a performance that just might be convincing to white audiences. When a canny spectator like Paul D reveals it as a feeble ruse, the infrastructure of racism itself, which assumes the inherent savagery of all Black persons, threatens to crumble. Consistently challenged by the behavior of the slaves themselves, this system of belief requires constant vigilance and a ceaseless supply of new evidence to grant it the status of truth.

The scientific method is represented in *Beloved* as the corrupt means by which racial bigotry is maintained and given legitimacy as empirical fact. Showmen and professionals alike used the rhetoric of science to prove the truth of racial difference. Thus Sethe recalls Schoolteacher's instructions to his pupils "to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193).³⁰ Schoolteacher, a merciless overseer and even more pernicious pedagogue, begins his chilling lesson with the same assumptions that undergirded Barnum's *What Is It?*—that the Black body combines human and animal attributes—and then proceeds to use scientific reasoning to detect and categorize those features. The scheme of

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classification devised by Schoolteacher is all the more horrifying because of the neat alignment of columns, a testament to the potential of empirical data to authorize popular racism. Naming this character Schoolteacher emphasizes the educational function of such taxonomies, which do not simply establish the “truth” of racial inferiority, but guarantee the transmission of that truth from one generation of slaveholders to the next. The encounter with Schoolteacher upsets Sethe enough to prompt her to ask her ailing mistress to define “characteristics” for her, to which Mrs. Garner replies, “a thing that’s natural to a thing” (195). This statement encapsulates the circular logic of the slave system, which naturalizes the association between blackness and certain mental and psychological attributes that are used, in turn, to legitimate the bondage of Black people.

It is hardly necessary for Morrison, writing in 1987, to prove that the association of slaves with atavistic savagery is profoundly unnatural. Her contribution is to take the dynamic staged at the carnival, in which Black viewers contemplate with delight “the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves,” as a starting point for examining the way that slavery makes whiteness itself a visible quality.³¹ The condition of human bondage encourages terrible and otherwise inexplicable acts within the slave community (such as the abandonment or murder of one’s own children) but is even more damaging to those who create and enforce that system. Thus Stamp Paid thinks about how the jungle associated with blackness “spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse even than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own” (198–99). Stamp Paid asserts that there is nothing natural about the jungle made by those who fear the consequences of their own barbarism. From this perspective, Schoolteacher’s insistence that the columns of characteristics be neatly aligned is clearly a defense against the realization that the anarchic jungle lurks within himself, a by-product of his cruelty that must be staved off through the imposition of orderly logic. Likewise, Paul D’s recognition that the Wild African Savage is an acquaintance from Roanoke does not simply lift the burden of barbarism from the Black body but relocates that savagery as the brainchild of the whitefolks who manage the carnival’s attractions.

Paul D’s demystification of the Wild African Savage presages the novel’s investment in denaturalizing the stereotype of Black animality by

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tracing its source to the institution of slavery erected by and for "white-folks." The freak-show savage embodies the abject characteristics attributed to Blacks to justify the persistence of inequalities after slavery and secure the purity of whiteness as his obverse. When Paul D disputes the truth of the Wild Man's mysterious demeanor, he also reveals the fragility of the association between blackness and bestiality, for if "African" is a fictive designation for the nationality of the man before them onstage, then surely "wild" and "savage" are equally fictitious identities. But the trauma of slavery cannot be resolved by one light-hearted moment of reversal: some months later, Paul D will betray Sethe when he responds to the story of the infanticide by telling her, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165), an accusation that becomes the ground for their estrangement. Implying that Sethe's behavior is more animal than human, Paul D refuses to comprehend the impossible situation that drove her to murder her own child as a preferable alternative to relinquishing her to the approaching slave catchers. He invokes a form of wildness that has nothing to do with Africa but is nonetheless all too real. This unfeeling remark is also the occasion for Paul D to remember that he and the other young male slaves at Sweet Home plantation regularly had sex with calves, a practice that likewise blurs the distinction between human and beast. "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers," Paul D thinks later, as he recalls the shared experience of suffering that initially drew him to Sethe but subsequently became painfully divisive.

Intended as an insult, the reminder that Sethe has "two feet" must also invoke the journey to freedom she made late in her pregnancy when, unable to use her swollen feet, she crawled on her hands and knees in a desperate effort to save her unborn infant and reach her children. The extreme horrors of slavery make it difficult, if not impossible, to pass definitive moral judgments about what constitutes properly "human" activity. The wildness mimicked by the freak show's African Savage spreads with infectious power through the novel, punctuating scenes of terror like "the *wildness* that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back" (71; emphasis mine) to accommodate a bit in the mouth; or Schoolteacher's reaction to the scene of carnage resulting from Sethe's effort to save her children, that "now she'd gone *wild*." The wildness exhibited by these slaves cannot be seen as the antithesis of the slave owner's civility but as a mirror that reflects the way that slavery has contaminated everything, threatening to dissolve moral categories and meaning itself.

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Freaking Beloved

The freak-show episode in *Beloved* is about more than the spectacle of whitefolks; it also provides a paradigm for reading the group dynamics that are continually being reworked throughout the rest of the novel as the ex-slaves struggle to define the contours of community. The carnival sequence dramatizes the powerful, ongoing process of identity formation that is called into question with particular force during visits to the freak show. The consolidation of that lumpy cluster of affiliations called identity occurs not only through the positive identification of self but by casting off the negative and undesirable elements that constitute the nonself. Nevertheless, the boundaries of identity, whether individual or collective, must be continually affirmed or reconfigured in response to external challenges. As Eve Sedgwick describes it, "to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal."³² At the carnival, two disenfranchised groups confront one another with derisive animosity. The ex-slaves leer and point at the freaks, while the freaks respond with unconcealed disdain. What happens at this freak show is less a confusion about the boundaries of *individual* self and body, often attributed to encounters with prodigies like conjoined twins, hermaphrodites, and persons with extra or missing limbs, than a confusion about the boundaries of *group* identity. *Beloved* acknowledges similarities between these marginalized communities, the shared suffering that their members are unable to recognize from within the context of their particular experiences of degradation: the bodies of freaks and slaves, conceived as the property of others, bar them from the comforts and privileges of a humanity that exceeds the limits of corporeal identity. In other words, the extreme visibility of dark skin or severe disabilities ensures that the slave and the freak will experience the body as a prison that they cannot escape. Unable to perceive their potential affinities, each camp consolidates the boundaries of its own group identity through the rejection of an even more abject collectivity.

The visit to the fair recalls the group dynamics responsible for Sethe's eighteen-year ostracism and establishes the possibility of her eventual reincorporation into the community.³³ Optimistically called a carnival, this traveling amusement park, which is actually "a lot less

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than mediocre (which is why it agreed to a Colored Thursday)" (48), has little in common with the ebullient grotesqueries that Bakhtin describes as "carnavalesque." Nonetheless, it maintains one of the most important features of Bakhtinian carnival, the ritualistic inversion of hierarchies and unsettling of power relations. And like the festive reversals recounted by Bakhtin, these category confusions are only temporary, serving more as a safety valve to ensure the stability of the dominant order than contributing to its overthrow; however, they anticipate the more enduring transformations that will occur around the freakish appearance and disappearance of Beloved herself.³⁴

As I have noted, the carnival and the freaks that are its central attraction are a poor shadow of the wonders promised by its promotional advertisements. Regardless of its rude performers and staff and mediocre entertainment, "it gave the four hundred black people in its audience thrill upon thrill upon thrill" (48). Far from irrelevant, the carnies' insulting behavior actually contributes to consolidating the bonds of community among the Black customers. Denver, long the object of an exclusionary gaze, takes particular pleasure in being "surrounded by a crowd of people who did not find her the main attraction." As she stands with Paul D and Sethe watching the midget dance, the collective experience of looking "made the stares of other Negroes kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces. Several even nodded and smiled at her mother" (48). Having encountered persons even more marginal than themselves, the group of onlookers invites Sethe and Denver back into its fold.

But this passing gesture of inclusion is hardly a promising step toward the creation of a more functional and supportive community, for it relies on the spectators' cruel sense of superiority to the freaks. The fat white lady who spits at the audience is amusing because "her bulk shortened her aim and they got a big kick out of the helpless meanness in her little eyes." She becomes an object of humorous derision when her enormous body renders her gesture of disrespect inconsequential. But the "helpless meanness" the Black fairgoers detect in her eyes must be understood as the product of earning her livelihood sitting onstage, where she must endure stares, prodding, and impudent questions. The fat lady's weight imprisons her in much the same way as does the slave's Black skin. *Beloved* demonstrates how the extreme rage engendered by prolonged psychological and physical cruelty may erupt in many ways, including violent aggression between one injured party and another. Although the ex-slaves are conditioned to find pleasure in unlikely places, the "big kick" they get from the fat lady's impotent meanness seems less

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like the deep, liberating belly laugh of Bakhtinian carnival than the barely repressed hostility that Freud attributes to defensive forms of humor.³⁵ In the same way that laughter in Tod Browning's *Freaks* is more a hysterical response to the freaks' challenge to bodily integrity than a sign of amusement, the audience's reaction to the freaks in *Beloved* must be linked to recollections of the fact that, as slaves, they were once subjected to the denigrating gaze of whitefolks and the abuse that inevitably accompanied it. "People I saw as a child," Sethe remarks later to Paul D, "who'd had the bit always looked wild after that" (71). The Wild African Savage may invite laughter at his absurd performance but may simultaneously stir more unpleasant memories of a wildness born of fury, humiliation, and physical pain.

Likewise, although she too has felt the pain of being "the main attraction," Denver cannot find the grounds to identify with the carnies' unenviable situation. But the connections Denver is unable to imagine are anticipated by Morrison's use of descriptive language. Denver buys sweets from a refreshment concession "manned by a little whitegirl in ladies' high-topped shoes" (48).³⁶ The apparent paradoxes in this sentence attest to the plight of a child who must work for a living. The table is "manned," implying a form of labor inappropriate for a young girl whose adult's shoes literalize the burden of responsibilities beyond her years. Forced to stand in someone else's shoes, this pathetic figure, at once man, girl, and woman, is a prototype for Denver, who will also have to compensate for her mother's neglect by working for a living. She too will venture into an adult world wearing clothes that don't fit her. These encounters between fairgoers and carnies, overlaid with hostility and misunderstanding, intimate similarities between the two groups that cannot be perceived by their participants. At this point in the narrative, an awareness of these common bonds is unavailable to the insiders themselves, although it is latent within Morrison's densely allusive prose.

Freaks are beings whose fantastic bodies defy categorization, who are found, in the most literal sense, on the platforms of sideshows, dime museums, and the carnival midway. I designate *Beloved* a freak to foreground the links between slaves and carnies and to describe the profound indeterminacy of her identity (who is she and where does she come from?), which cannot be disassociated from the otherwise inexplicable physical metamorphoses that she undergoes throughout the course of the narrative. Her presence encourages the development of a healing community among the ex-slaves of Cincinnati but also leaves the uncomfortable possibility that the formation of communities always depends on the exclusion of an even more abject group. Although the

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freaks' fantastic bodies are long gone by the close of the novel, as is Beloved's equally spectacular embodied form, Morrison's text cautions that the solidification of collective bonds may take place at the expense of less visible, but no less haunting, others. The destructive potential of community is an ongoing concern in Morrison's fiction, from the citizens of Lorain, Ohio, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), who allow Pecola Breedlove's self-hatred to reach tragic proportions, to the Bottom's rejection of Sula Peace in *Sula* (1973), to the deadly confrontation between the men of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the women in the convent in *Paradise* (1998).

Whereas the carnival freaks briefly and grudgingly unsettle racial hierarchies by allowing Black customers to occupy the position of spectators, the appearance of Beloved, a real freak whose bizarre attributes—unlike those of the Wild African Savage—are never explained or diffused, enables the community to begin working through the traumatic events that continue to haunt their relationships to one another. The particular significance of the carnival excursion for Sethe is reinforced by the manifestation of Beloved directly afterward. Although the embodied Beloved first appears in the chapter following the excursion, her emergence from the river coincides temporally with the visit to the carnival itself, as if the freak show, with its temporary reversals, has somehow produced a more enduring and significant oddity outside its gates. The link between Beloved's materialization and the freak show is suggested by Sethe's initial response, an immediate need to urinate so intense and prolonged that she feels like a freak herself: "Just about the time she started wondering if the carnival would accept another freak, it stopped" (51). The amount of liquid Sethe produces is so copious that she relates it to the breaking water of Denver's birth. It is no accident that Sethe's identification with the freaks occurs in a passage that also mentions the newborn Denver, her own absent mother, and the stranger who will turn out to be her murdered older daughter, Beloved, come back to life. This associative chain implies that relations between enslaved mothers and daughters are akin to the alienating relations of the freak show, where some persons are stripped of autonomy and self-determination as their bodies become the property of others.³⁷ Sethe's body registers the import of the meeting long before she realizes the identity of the mysterious stranger. Her visceral reaction anticipates the intense bond she will develop with Beloved, which renders desires and memories unavailable for verbal expression in the form of corporeal sensations.³⁸

The identification between Beloved and the carnival freaks persists as the bizarre circumstances of her appearance and nature confound rational explanation. Beloved's supernatural qualities have led many critics

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to interpret her as a ghost, and indeed, the notion of ghostly haunting is useful for describing the persistence of the traumatic memories that she invokes, as well as the spectral presence that haunts the house on Blue-stone Road until Paul D arrives.³⁹ But this infantile phantom is substantially different from the fully embodied woman who appears after the carnival. The terms *ghost* and *freak* are useful for distinguishing between these two distinctive manifestations, separated from one another by the experience of carnival. Calling the materialized Beloved a freak draws attention to her association with the disempowered persons on display at the sideshow, connections that are embedded at the level of figurative language and that push us to acknowledge affinities between oppressed groups. Moreover, Beloved is a freak because of the unavoidable fact of her body. The intangible quality of ghostliness is inadequate to describe the warm, greedy, desiring sentience of the stranger who appears after the freak show. As I will demonstrate, *Beloved* is a novel relatively uninterested in interiority as such, for it projects the emotional states of its characters onto the surfaces of the human form.

The associative links among motherhood, freaks, and community in *Beloved* are prefigured by Pilate, the most powerful female character in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Having fought her way out of her dead mother's body, the newborn baby emerges without a navel, her smooth belly a sign of her detachment from the woman who engendered her. Alienated from one community after another, Pilate is dismayed to find that her disability is unmarketable: "Even a traveling show would have rejected her, since her freak quality lacked that important ingredient—the grotesque. There was really nothing to see. Her defect, frightening and exotic as it was, was also a theatrical failure. It needed intimacy, gossip, and the time it took for curiosity to become drama" (148–49). Similarly, Beloved's freak qualities are not shocking or sensational; they manifest slowly as her difference becomes apparent to the members of Sethe's family and the close-knit society that surrounds it.

Like the carnival freaks, Beloved embodies apparently unresolvable contradictions. She is simultaneously childlike and a grown woman, sick and glowing with health, innocent and fully sexualized, strong and feeble. When Sethe worries about Beloved's weakness, Paul D responds suspiciously that she "can't walk, but I seen her pick up the rocker with one hand" (56). The disparity between Sethe's and Paul D's assessments of Beloved indicates how closely their perceptions of her physical body stem from a more profound sense of her significance to each of their lives. She appears frail and childlike to Sethe, who longs to protect the daughter she was forced to murder; she takes the form of a powerful

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sexual aggressor to Paul D, who fears the disruption of the tentative new life he has made at the house on Bluestone Road.

Beloved's paradoxical embodiment of frailty and inexplicable strength is a prototype for the physical transformations the other women in the novel will undergo. Akin to the carnival freaks, whose oddities are most commonly defined in terms of deviations in shape and size—"twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton" or hardly anything at all—the women at 124 shrink and grow in unexpected ways. The rapidity and excess of these corporeal changes suggest that they in fact describe emotional states. In *Beloved* something akin to the unconscious, where unspeakable and unresolved traumas reside, registers in the external contours of the female form. Early in the novel, Sethe is described as a "quiet, queenly woman," whose emotional fortitude, which enabled her to escape slavery, survive prison, and raise a daughter alone, is conveyed by her powerful, statuesque corporeality. The scars that traverse her back, a "sculpture . . . like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (49), recall wounds that have healed but leave permanent traces of violence and injury. Likewise, Denver's fleshy face and "far too womanly breasts" bespeak a body developed beyond its years. Paul D notices Denver's mature breasts precisely at the moment when she tearfully describes the isolation she and her mother have endured, her excessive size reflecting the emotional growth required of the young girl during years of ostracism from the surrounding community. The unmistakable signs that Denver *has a body*—her tears, hunger, thirst, and pouting—demand her mother's affection in a manner almost unbearable to Sethe, who has been conditioned by enslavement to maintain a distance from her own offspring. Referring to the dangerous love for her own children in corporeal terms, she tells Paul D, "I was big . . . and deep and wide" (162). As Beloved insinuates herself into the household she will challenge the monumentality of both Sethe and Denver, whose statuesque bodies bespeak strength of character but also a dangerously isolated individuation.

As Beloved's needs take their toll on Sethe and Denver, the burden is manifest physically in the shrinking and weakening of their bodies. Initially replicating the joyful excess of the carnival outing, Sethe spends her life savings "to feed themselves with fancy food and decorate themselves with ribbon and dress goods" (242), but as the money runs out, Beloved, with her "basket-fat stomach" (243), continues to expand, demanding "sweets although she was getting bigger, plumper by the day" (239). Beloved's untoward appetites are literally devouring Sethe. Even as they starve, Sethe clothes the household in "carnival dresses" made

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from gaudy materials that connect the reversals within the carnival gates to the reversals occasioned by Beloved's appearance: as Beloved expands, Sethe shrinks; as Beloved fills with vitality, Sethe droops listlessly; the young Beloved "looked the mother, Sethe the teething child" (250). Threatening to overpower the dwindling bodies within them, the brightly colored garments, in their excess, signal the dangers of excessive, self-consuming desire in a house once devoid of color.

As Beloved grows, Sethe, once a "quiet, queenly woman," becomes thin and fragile. Sethe's desire for Beloved is dangerous because it overpowers concern for her living daughter or her own well-being. Denver observes that "the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn't a piece of clothing in the house that didn't sag on her" (239). Akin to the ghostly Beloved that Paul D initially perceived as "thin," the formerly monumental Sethe is frail and weak with hunger, her body literally eaten away by the "thickness" of her love. Similarly, Denver, at one time physically mature for her age, also shrinks, growing not only thinner but also shorter and smaller: "the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover[ed] her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor" (243). While Denver's weight loss is a consequence of starvation, her shrinking cannot be explained except as a literalization of her dwindling importance in her mother's eyes. Finally, in "a dress so loud it embarrassed the needlepoint seat" (247), Denver ventures out into the community to seek help. Her previous attempt to establish relationships outside her family by enrolling in Lady Jones's makeshift school was greeted with the invitation: "Come in the front door, Miss Denver. This is not a side show" (102). Lady Jones makes an important distinction between active participation and staring, which replicates the alienating dynamics of the sideshow. Denver's second attempt at reintegration is more successful because the community is more willing to acknowledge her effort, responding with the contrition and generosity that it was unable to muster in the past.

Ultimately, the efforts of the entire community are required to counteract Sethe's assertion that she doesn't need the world outside. The crowd of women who gather in front of her house on Bluestone Road witnesses Sethe reliving the traumatic event in which she took the life of the infant Beloved to protect her from the approaching slave catchers. This time, however, she turns her rage outward, brandishing an ice pick at the solitary white man who approaches the house on horseback. Sethe's actions banish Beloved in her embodied form. A process that began with the visit to the carnival ends with the integration of the on-lookers (the group of women) with the object of their gaze, as Sethe

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plunges off the porch into the crowd, "running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind" (261). Abandoning Beloved indicates that she is ready to move beyond both the deadly repression of the past, which took shape as the "thin" baby ghost, and the excesses of dwelling on the past, embodied by the grown "basket-fat" freak Beloved. The point is not that the terrible trauma is resolved at this moment but that her burden cannot be shouldered alone. Individuality and self-reliance are not the antidotes to the unfreedom of slavery in *Beloved*, which concludes that its wounds can be salvaged only through the formation of new kinds of collectivity. Sethe has made the first step toward reentry into a group that, in turn, seems ready to acknowledge her crime as their own. In this, the community recognizes that Beloved is the embodiment not simply of Sethe's individual acts but of the greed, barbarism, and wildness of slavery itself, a freak child born of their collective suffering.

Like any freak a being who relies as much on the spectator's imaginative work as the prodigious contours of her body, Beloved is part of a fragmented story that shifts depending on the teller. Finally, it is forgotten, for "remembering seemed unwise" (274). But like conjoined twins, the double meaning of the novel's final injunction, "this is not a story to pass on," remains. Countless readers have pondered the meaning of this ambiguous warning. Is Beloved's a story to be shared with others, to "pass on" from one generation to the next? Or is it a story to leave behind, to "pass on" as one moves toward something else? This dual process of identification and dissociation is suggested by the image of "the photograph of a close friend or relative" evoked in one of the novel's final paragraphs that "looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there" (275). This uncanny experience, in which the image of a loved one momentarily becomes the "more familiar" reflection of the self, is akin to the moment at the freak show when identity is shattered and reconfigured by encounters with persons so strange that they confuse our very sense of self and other. This tentative recognition of the shifting boundaries between self and body, and the way they might merge with others, is a crucial aspect in the development of a collectivity that can embrace, as well as wound and exclude.

Reclaiming Wild

Baby. Grown woman. Ghost. Memory. Forgotten past. Wound. Healer. Beloved, as many have remarked, is a figure for the impossible but

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necessary task of working through collective loss.⁴⁰ That process involves healing and forgiveness but too often also entails the scapegoating of another more unfortunate and dispossessed group. Beloved is also a freak, for freaks are at once living persons and the bodily projection of our most profound individual and collective traumas. It is impossible to see a freak unmediated by the desires and anxieties that filter our perception of extreme alterity. Early in the novel, the Black audience at the carnival is not ready to recognize its own misfortunes mirrored in the unhappy performers onstage. Seeking entertainment and forgetting, they resist finding images that recall their own exploitation and instead simply reverse the terms by loading derision onto the freaks. Although freaks and slaves have both suffered the experience of imprisonment within their own bodies, the characters in *Beloved* identify only with the racial freak. Later, as Sethe stands before them in much the same position, they are able to acknowledge her suffering as a necessary and painful part of their own past, literally reincorporating her into the group. Recalling Mrs. Garner's simple definition of a characteristic as "a thing that's natural to a thing," the community affirms race as the grounds for their identification with one another and their rejection of outsiders, whether they be well-meaning abolitionists or the bigots responsible for the jungle so vividly described by Stamp Paid. Banishing Beloved, they also banish the specter of the white man on horseback, the abolitionist Mr. Bodwin, whose benevolence must be rejected along with the slave owners' cruelty.⁴¹ The grotesque Sambo figurine that decorates the Bodwins' kitchen implicates him in the same representational system that created the Wild African Savage.

Any reader tempted to resolve these antagonisms by resorting to a common humanity would do well to heed the words of Guitar in *Song of Solomon* when he asserts that "white people are unnatural . . . the disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (156–57). Guitar has learned Schoolteacher's lesson that race is a biological fact, which can be measured scientifically because it is lodged, like a pathogen, in the body's cellular matter. Patently ridiculous freaks like the Wild African Savage attest to the fraudulence of these lessons; the cruelty and abuse exchanged between Black spectators and white performers remind us of the lesson's palpably real effects. Set loose in the world, they emerge from the mouth of a man like Guitar, who has no other vocabulary to articulate his rage at unprovoked violence against Black citizens. When each group views the other's difference as the product of an intractable nature, there is little possibility for mutual recognition. The reconsolidation of communal bonds initiated by the

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freak show will take place without challenging more profound racial divisions, lodged firmly in place through the crimes of history. Ultimately, while the meaning of the freak show's invocation of racial essences is called into question, the fact that those essences exist is not.

Beloved ends not with a moment of divisive rage but with the possibility of healing as the community turns inward to shelter its own members. In a final reminder of the excursion to the fair, as Paul D sits by Sethe's bedside to comfort her he "examines the quilt patched in carnival colors" (272), an image that knits together many disparate lives and the pain they endured in a commemorative pattern. Unlike the carnival dresses bought with Sethe's life savings, which represented a retreat into the past at the expense of the future, the "carnival colors" signify the acknowledgment of the past as it is woven into something useful to those alive in the present. As they become part of the quilt, the pieces lose their particularity, each making its own significant and colorful contribution to the pattern.

This pattern continues as *Beloved* returns to haunt the pages of Morrison's next novel, *Jazz*, in the form of a disheveled, speechless woman named Wild. As Morrison described her to an interviewer, "The woman they call Wild . . . could be Sethe's daughter *Beloved*. When you see *Beloved* towards the end, you don't know; she's either a ghost who has been exorcised or she's a real person pregnant by Paul D, who runs away, ending up in Virginia, which is right next to Ohio." Morrison's next sentence, "But I don't want to make all these connections," does not undo what went before but insists on the necessary ambiguity of both wild women, whose significance must be conjoined in part through the reader's own imaginings.⁴² Like the Wild African Savage of the freak show, who is at once familiar and exotic, Wild is both known and mysterious, a living woman who suffers pain and hunger and the stuff of local fantasy, "a used-to-be-long-ago crazy girl." But unlike the carnival wild man, whose wildness is as fictive as his African nationality, Wild roams freely through the cane fields of Virginia (and perhaps from one text to another), haunting those she encounters with the possibility that the boundary between their civility and her savagery is less than stable. As Michael Taussig suggests, wildness in ethnographic writing is more than the antithesis of Western rationality and order; it represents the threat, at once terrifying and enticing, of the dissolution of signification itself: "[Wildness] is the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly, loose in the forest encircling the city and the sown land, disrupting the conventions upon which meaning and the shaping function of images rest."⁴³ This chapter has treated wildness largely in terms of

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its performative dimensions in an age of confidence men and Barnumesque entertainment. Taussig's observations recall a more serious definition of wildness as the place where reason and order come to an end. In Morrison's fiction, this frightening wildness is born of slavery and the legacy of racism and poverty that survives in its wake. This wildness is not to be found in nature, for it is the product of human history and institutions.

By evocatively linking Wild to Beloved, Morrison suggests that her past is connected to the collective trauma of enslavement that haunts U.S. history and endures in the embodied memories of its citizens. Most of *Jazz* takes place among a generation removed from slavery. Set in 1920s Harlem, the novel focuses on Wild's son Joe Trace as he is caught up in a drama of passion, adultery, murder, and forgiveness. An undomesticated, antimaternal figure, Wild is the apparent antithesis to the urban dwellers of Manhattan. At the same time, although they do not know each other, she seems to have transmitted the pain and disorder of her own life to her offspring. Neat categorical oppositions between past and present, madness and sanity, threaten to become unmoored, as wildness bursts forth at the heart of civilization in Joe's murderous desire for Dorcas, Violet's irrational rage at Dorcas's corpse, the incurable eruptions of Dorcas's skin. Beloved, reincarnated, or simply relocated as Wild, thus perpetually returns to remind the community of what remains outside, inhabiting the abject spaces rejected by even the most marginal persons but unwilling, or perhaps unable, to go away.

NOTES

1. Here, of course, the two Black men are not using the term *freak* in reference to the sideshow. They are invoking the tradition of the African American toasts in which freaks are figures of monstrous (often sexual) excess. The world is "freaky" and "fucked-up" because they can find no more precise way to explain a bewildering, and potentially overwhelming, series of events. While the two uses of *freak* may seem unrelated, the following exploration of Morrison's fiction will reveal continuities between the term's different connotations. On freaks in African American toasts see Bruce Jackson, *"Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
2. In her reading of this scene, Emily Miller Budick accuses Paul D of macho posturing. While his actions may betray elements of self-aggrandizement, he also displays an infectious generosity toward Sethe and Denver, which invites other members of the Black community to behave similarly. While Paul D alone cannot heal Sethe's wounds, he begins the important process of her reintegra-

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tion into the community. See Budick, "Absence, Loss, and the Space of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Arizona Quarterly* 48 (summer 1992): 117–38.

3. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 47–49. All subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Elissa Schappell, "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review* 35, no. 128 (1993): 105. Walter Benn Michaels reads *Beloved* as an allegory for contemporary American understandings of history, in which the past endures in the present in the form of ghosts, who are the literary equivalent of "culture." Culture, in Michaels's controversial argument, boils down to an antiracist racial essentialism. This chapter will connect Morrison's commitment to essentialism to her evocation of the freak show. See Michaels, "'You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust," *Narrative* 4, no. 1 (1996): 1–16.

5. On the confidence man, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

6. On Morrison's concept of rememory, see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," in *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David L. Middleton (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 135–64.

7. On Black-white racial anxiety and the emergence of freak shows in the 1840s, see Leonard Cassuto, "The Racial Freak, the Happy Slave, and the Problems of Melville's Universal Man," in *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Bluford Adams describes the development of an increasingly hierarchical understanding of race in Barnum's exhibits in "'A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires': The Barnum Hippodromes and Circuses," in *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

8. James W. Cook Jr., "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P. T. Barnum's 'What Is It?' Exhibition," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 140.

9. Rosemarie Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

10. W. C. Thompson, *On the Road with a Circus* (New York: Amsterdam Book Co., 1905), 69.

11. Scott Hart, "How Circus Freaks are Made," *Coronet*, May 1946, 49–50.

12. *What We Know About Waino and Plutano the Wild Men of Borneo* (New York: Damon and Peets, Printers, n.d.), Houghton Library Theater Collection, Harvard University.

13. W. C. Thompson, *On the Road*, 70.

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14. George Templeton Strong, *The Diaries*, excerpted in *Writing New York*, ed. Philip Lopate (New York: Library of America, 1998), 211.

15. See Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Curiosities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) on the fabrication of ethnographic freaks.

16. "Side Shows," *Strand Magazine* 13 (1897): 409.

17. Hart, "How Circus Freaks Are Made," 49.

18. W. C. Thompson, *On the Road*, 70–71.

19. W. C. Thompson, *On the Road*, 70.

20. The cruelty of showmen eager to exploit the racial freak's potential is also the subject of Eudora Welty's short story "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," in which Lee Roy, a diminutive Black man with a club foot, is kidnapped by a traveling carnival and forced to perform as a savage woman. As Steve, the talker, describes the act, "it was supposed to be a Indian woman, see, in this red dress an' stockin's. It didn't have on no shoes, so when it drug its foot ever-body could see. . . . When it come to the chicken's heart, it would eat that too, real fast, and the heart would still be jumpin'" (76). The figure of "Keela" demonstrates how tenuous the freak's claim to authenticity could be, for not only do nonwhite races slip interchangeably into one another, Black easily becoming Indian, but so do genders. See Eudora Welty, "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941).

21. On Joice Heth, see Bluford Adams, Neil Harris, and Ben Reiss, "P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth, an Antebellum Spectacle of Race," *American Quarterly* 51 (March 1999): 78–107.

22. See Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, for an analysis of different versions of Barnum's autobiography.

23. The freak show's embrace of authenticity seems, on the surface, to differentiate it from the equally popular nineteenth-century form of blackface minstrelsy, which exploited the difference between the white performer and the Black character he was playing. Bill Brown describes the relationship between minstrelsy and the freak show in evolutionary terms, as "a transition from performative subjectivity to unperformed abjection," that is, from the parodic theatricalization of blackface to the static essentialism of the ethnographic curiosity. Whereas the explicit intention of blackface minstrelsy is to mimic blackness (generally by those who are not themselves Black), the freak show represents the intractable savagery of Black bodies as an empirical fact. This is a plausible description of the racial exhibit's intended effects; however, such intentions are complicated by examples that attest to the sideshow as a venue just as invested in performance, parody, and dialogue between audience and performer as blackface minstrelsy. See Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 214.

24. Strong, *Diaries*, 211.

25. George C. Middleton, quoted in Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 176.

26. I am referring to the well-known debates among feminist critics that begin with Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film*

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Theory and Criticism, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 746–57, which assumes that the gender of the spectator dictates her identification with the screen image. Subsequent criticism, too copious to cite in a note, has demonstrated that spectatorship is far more complicated and varied than Mulvey's direct correlation would suggest.

27. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 124.

28. Manthia Diawara has acknowledged the Black viewer's particular difficulty identifying with the spectatorial positions established by classic cinematic narratives, as well as the elision of questions of race from debates about cinematic spectatorship, in "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 66–76. On race and resistant viewing practices, see also Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Petal Felix and Jacqui Roach, "Black Looks," in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. Lorraine Gammon and Margaret Marshment (Seattle: Red Comet Press, 1989), 130–42; Ann Freidberg, "A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification," in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 36–45; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); and Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994). Ed Guerrero has applied theories of the gaze to Morrison's fiction in "Tracking 'The Look' in the Novels of Toni Morrison," in *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David L. Middleton (New York and London: Garland, 1997), 27–44.

29. Harris, *Humbug*, 75.

30. This scene is consistent with Budick's contention that counting and numerical formations are important in *Beloved* for both enslavers and the ex-slaves who need to make a place for themselves in the free world. Elaborating on the dual significance of counting, she writes that "this book pulls us toward the problematics of what (and who) counts as family and as history, indeed, even what counts as human" ("Absence, Loss, and the Space of History" 130).

31. The imperative to make whiteness visible, robbing it of claims to transcendence and universality, is also crucial to Morrison's critical project. Her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) is one of the finest works of literary criticism to take whiteness as a starting point for an analysis of race.

32. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 61.

33. In an analysis of Morrison's earlier fiction, Eliot Butler-Evans proposes that the desires of her Black female protagonists are often in tension with the communities that surround them. He writes of *Tar Baby*, "Morrison brings to the fore . . . the contentiousness between the desires of the mythical community and those of the black woman whose existence is structured by historical and social circumstances different from those of the community." See Butler-Evans, *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 162.

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34. There is an ample body of criticism that debates whether Bakhtinian carnival is a source of revolutionary potential or social containment. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (London: Duckworth, 1975); Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981); and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

35. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1960).

36. I also read this moment as a revision of the painful scene in *The Bluest Eye* when Pecola buys candy from a white shopkeeper who recoils at the prospect of taking money from her hand.

37. Many critics have emphasized the primacy of the mother-daughter relationship in *Beloved*, but Morrison herself claims that the murdered child could have been male with much the same effect. On the significance of this female bond, see Lorraine Liscio, "Beloved's Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 11, no. 1 (1992): 31–47; Ashraf Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *American Literature* 64 (Sept. 1992): 567–80; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Margaret Garner: A Cincinnati Story," *Massachusetts Review* 32 (fall 1991): 417–41. Undoubtedly, one aspect of Morrison's project is to revalorize female experience and female storytellers, but her emphasis rests more on the difficulties of motherhood than on an essential female bond between mother and daughter. In fact, relations between mothers and sons are at the center of fictional works such as *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*. See Morrison's discussion of motherhood in the interview by Cecil Brown in the *Massachusetts Review* 36 (fall 1995): 455–73.

38. Jean Wyatt argues that typically metaphorical relations are literalized by the characters in *Beloved*, who experience the materiality of language inscribed upon their bodies. See Wyatt, "Giving Body to the World: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *PMLA* 108 (May 1993): 474–88.

39. For the most sustained discussion of *Beloved*'s ghostly status, see Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 183.

40. Melancholia does not figure prominently in this analysis but is a useful critical paradigm for understanding the way that *Beloved*, afflicted with realist detail, also describes the fantastic haunting of a group traumatized by a past with which it has not yet been able to come to terms. For psychoanalytic readings of the novel that make this argument, see David Lawrence, "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*," *Studies in American Fiction* 19 (autumn 1991): 189–202; and Roger Luckhurst, "'Impossible Mourning' in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Michele Roberts's *Daughters of the House*," *Critique* 37 (summer 1996): 243–61. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon also discusses Morrison's interweaving of history—the fictionalized story of Margaret Garner—with the magical realism of a ghost story, a strategy that allows her to narrate events that could not be accessed through more conventional historical or sociological methods.

41. Analyzing *Beloved* as a critique of contemporary liberalism, James Berger

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argues for Bodwin's complicity in *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

42. Angels Carabi, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *Belles Lettres* 9 (spring 1994): 39.

43. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 219.