On Failing to Make the Past Present

Stephen Best

No resurrection can be anything other than a prelude to ultimate erasure.
—Alain Corbin, The Life of an Unknown

Currently, it passes for an unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present. It can be hard to acknowledge that that past was not always thought to explain the present. Under the sway of habit, many scholars have staked their own critical agency on a recovery of the political agency of the enslaved, making the slaves’ “hidden history” a vital dimension of the effort to define black political goals in terms of a model of representation. The slave past has thus assumed a primacy in black critical thought that it did not necessarily have previously, entailing a particu-


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lar black intellectual conception of politics—but slavery’s political perspicacity should not be taken to imply universal applicability.

In fact, why has the slave past had such enormous weight for an entire generation of thinkers? Why must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between that past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study that past is somehow to intervene in it? Through what process has it become possible to claim the lives and efforts of history’s defeated as ours either to redeem or to redress? And if we take slavery’s dispossessions to live on into the twenty-first century, divesting history of movement and change, then what form can effective political agency take? Why must our relation to the past be ethical in the first place—and is it possible to have a relation to the past that is not predicated on ethics? It is time to ask these questions again, though I am far from having answers to them.

The idea of continuity between the slave past and our present provides a framework for conceptions of black collectivity and community across time. And this idea, a proxy for race, nests within it a significant thesis: the present that most African Americans experience was forged at some historical nexus when slavery and race conjoined, and in the coupling of European colonial slavery and racial blackness a history both inevitable and determined proved the result. Nonetheless, with terms of coalition and political solidarity increasingly difficult to articulate, a sense of racial belonging rooted in the historical dispossession of slavery seems unstable ground on which to base a politics. My goal is merely to clear some space for a black politics not animated by a sense of collective condition or solidarity.

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2 One of the most full-throated and insightful statements of the thesis appears in the opening paragraph of Bryan Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace*: “Perhaps the most important thing we have to remember about the black tradition is that Africa and its diaspora are older than blackness. Blackness does not come from Africa. Rather, Africa and its diaspora become black during a particular stage in their history. It sounds a little strange to put it this way, but the truth of this description is widely acknowledged. Blackness is an adjunct to racial slavery. . . . Blackness is an indelibly modern condition that cannot be conceptualized apart from the epochal changes . . . that were together made possible by the European systems of colonial slavery” (*Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009], 1).

The project of rethinking racial belonging might well begin with forms of unbelonging, negative sociability, abandonment, and other disruptions that thwart historical recovery. These premise a kind of social connectedness on what anthropologists term “social abandonment,” the idea that the social destinies of the unwanted “are ordered.”  

The traces of abandonment frustrate historical recovery (or the attempt to solicit the past for present purposes) to the extent that they signal “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion,” especially when the names proposed for that natality are either “race” or “blackness.” One critical origin for these ideas comes from queer theory, specifically the historiographical ethics of what Leo Bersani calls an “anticommunal model of connectedness,” or in Daniel Tiffany’s phrase “a sociological sublime magnetized by abjection.” These strains of thought not only acknowledge the radical alterity of the past but announce that “it may be necessary to check the impulse to turn . . . representations [of the past] to good use in order to see them at all.” This essay invites contemplation of the gains to be derived from extending the queer acknowledgment of nonrelationality between the past and the present to the racial case.

An understanding of slavery in relation to the politics of abandonment (as articulated especially in queer critique) responds to the calls of David Scott and David Lloyd to invigorate discussions of the usable past with the idea of failed futures. Extending the insights of Reinhart Koselleck’s *Futures Past*, Scott argues that the political projects begun by earlier revolutionaries and historical predecessors can be neither continued nor completed. It is futile to attempt to redeem the past, as for-

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merly dominant cognitive and political categories can no longer “have the same usefulness, the same salience, the same critical purchase, when the historical conjuncture that originally gave [them] point and purchase has passed.” Any revisionary practice of historical criticism in the present must unfold against the backdrop of “the dead end of the hopes that defined the futures of the anticolonial and . . . postcolonial projects.”

Faced with such foreclosed possibilities, we have only our present conjuncture, only our current predicament. Writing in much the same spirit, Lloyd argues that the figures in the past with whom we crave a connection possess their own “specific and unreproducible orientation to the future,” and our present, rather than represent the fulfillment of that projection, is more likely “the future imposed on the dead by past violence.” The restlessness of the dead, Lloyd proposes, “stems from the lack of a future fit for them.”

To be historical in our work, we might thus have to resist the impulse to redeem the past and instead rest content with the fact that our orientation toward it remains forever perverse, queer, askew.

With its goal of replacing holding with letting go, clutching with disavowal, this essay runs against the grain of work advanced under the banners of “recovery” and “melancholy.” The goal is to specify some of the limits to these modes of critique and to propose other ways of thinking about loss than have been offered by the melancholic turn in recent African Americanist and African-diasporic cultural criticism.

A Thesis on the Philosophy of History

As for when slavery emerged as the constituent object and metaphor in African American studies, I would nominate 1988 as an important turning point. In the advent of that year, significant works had appeared that placed the slave’s narrative and habitus at the center of the symbolic order that Hortense J. Spillers would name the “American grammar

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book”: Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *Signifying Monkey*, Houston A. Baker Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Hazel V. Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Valerie Smith’s *Self-Discovery and Authority*, and Spillers’s own “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” The paragon literary text of this moment was of course Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in that year—about when the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers also began to appear. Soon after, Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993) promoted slavery to a unified field theory, which anchored the black experience of modernity in “a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience.” Gilroy’s compelling claim for the connection between “living memory and the slave sublime” (187) served many of the same critical ambitions as the Morrisonian proposal that “all of it is now, it is always now.”

Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” provided Atlantic studies with a solid academic brief, inspiring the shift toward a historiography that was recursive and generally athwart the established practice of writing history as a rational, developmental national narrative. One successor has been Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), about which I will have more to say. In another, *The Reaper’s Garden* (2008), Vincent Brown offers a powerful revision of the view (rooted largely in Enlightenment ideals of revolutionary overcoming) that the threat of death in slavery presents the signature face of a one-dimensional and top-down exercise of power. Rather, Brown argues, slaves and their antagonists struggled over the meaning of death and out of that process forged a society from a human catastrophe—they spun “hope from fear and community from chaos.” Saidiya Hartman, in *Lose Your Mother* (2007), compellingly substitutes the affect of her own encounters with traces of the

11 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73. Colin (Joan) Dayan faults Gilroy’s entire method for the ease with which it transforms slavery into “nothing more than a metaphor” (“Paul Gilroy’s Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor,” *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 4 [1996]: 7), and hers is still the most rigorous critique of the idea of “the black Atlantic.”
slave past for the dispassionate analysis that prevails in most histories of slavery. Her embrace of slavery’s dispossession as the generative condition of African Americans (“We may have forgotten our country, but we haven’t forgotten our dispossession”) corrects for a vindicationist strain in several generations of work in social history that has tended to find only resistance to slavery’s oppression worthy of historical recovery.\footnote{Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 87.} Add to these books Alexander X. Byrd’s Captives and Voyagers (2008), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s Many-Headed Hydra (2000), Cassandra Pybus’s Epic Journeys of Freedom (2006), Rediker’s Slave Ship (2007), Joseph Roach’s Cities of the Dead (1996), James Sidbury’s Becoming African in America (2007), and Stephanie E. Smallwood’s Saltwater Slavery (2007), and one gets a picture of how incredibly rich this critical moment has been. Collectively, this work has enabled the traumatic events of slavery and the middle passage to suffuse the vastness of the Atlantic itself as a general historical framework and condition.

As a model for a “counter-culture of modernity,” black Atlantic history substitutes recession, vanishing, and dispersal for the expansionist conceits of Enlightenment-inspired histories. As Elisa Tamarkin summarizes this shift, “Atlantic history is a fantasy of relation that is not transmitted across time so much as embraced through the imagined origins of material from a vanished world.”\footnote{Elisa Tamarkin, “Transatlantic Returns,” in A Companion to American Literary Studies, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 266–67.} Within the predominant modes of Atlanticism, the data of historical experience are connected by the geography that disperses them; or, to phrase the matter in an affective way, the history of the black Atlantic comes into existence only through loss and can in turn be sustained only through more tales of its loss.

Displaced and subordinated in this moment were traditions of thought that took “the legacy of slavery” to be at best a psychological inheritance that needed to be rejected and at worst a reactionary explanation of black character. “There is no a priori necessity,” wrote Orlando Patterson as early as 2007, that “because a people has experienced slavery, they will all share a legacy of slavery.” Instead, he pro-
posed that the next great cultural advance of humanity would involve the rejection of tradition and of particularism:

The Blacks of the Americas now face a historic choice. To survive they must abandon their search for a past, must indeed recognize that they lack all claims to a distinctive cultural heritage, and that the path ahead lies not in myth making and in historical reconstruction, which are always doomed to failure, but in accepting the epic challenge of their reality. Black Americans can be the first group in the history of mankind who transcend the confines and grip of a cultural heritage, and in so doing, they can become the most truly modern of all people—a people who feel no need for a nation, a past, or a particularistic culture, but whose style of life will be a rational and continually changing adaptation to the exigencies of survival, at the highest possible level of existence. . . . Should blacks succeed in doing this, they will indeed make themselves unique. In a world where every group still strives to be unique, to preserve its past, and to hold sacred the principle of continuity, a group which discards uniqueness and spurns tradition will by that very fact become unique in a truly revolutionary way.16

Morrison no doubt played a major hand in smothering Patterson’s vision, directing attention in African American studies straight toward the slave past and diaspora. It would not be going too far to add that her Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 positioned *Beloved* to shape the way a generation of scholars conceived of its ethical relationship to the past. For a distinctive if not singular moment in the history of the interpretive disciplines, a novel set the terms of the political and historiographical agenda. The rise of *Beloved* moved the entire field of literary studies to a central place in African American studies, and this move redressed what Eric Slauter describes as literary criticism’s “trade deficit” with the discipline of history.17 With Morrisonian poetics as a guide, the black Atlantic provided a way of making history for those who had lost it and as such secured the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism.18

Whereas mourning, in Sigmund Freud’s account, represents the

18 The scholarly study that exemplifies this resurgent melancholy (and makes the most compelling case for it) is Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
successful acceptance of loss, affiliated with “the repetitive divestment of what has passed”19 and with a capacity for dawning or awakening, melancholy marks a refusal of such detachment and a persistent identification with the lost object. The melancholic historicism that is currently resurgent celebrates the commitment to remain “faithful to the lost object” and to “refus[e] to renounce [the critic’s] attachment to it.”20 Morrison has given countless descriptions and reminders of what we have at stake in melancholy. As she proffers in one interview:

Well, that’s the carnage. It can’t be abstract. The loss of that man [Halle, in Beloved] to his mother, to his wife, to his children, to his friends, is a serious loss and the reader has to feel it, you can’t feel it if he’s in there. He has to not be there. . . .

The notion of the devastation of those families is real, and you can’t communicate how serious it is without indicating that at some point the system will stop you. . . . Usually it’s an abstract concept—but I and the reader have to yearn for their company, for the people who are gone, to know what slavery did.21

“To know what slavery did,” to make it not simply an object of experience or epistemology but the grounds of memory, Morrison resists a view of loss as the property of an immediate circle of kin and encourages us to claim that loss for ourselves. These are the historical ethics that underwrite “rememory,” Sethe’s idea that the slave past is “never going away”—for “the picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (Beloved, 3.4). This formation of history as memory, as well as the compelling critiques of it, should be familiar to most readers.


A good deal of recent scholarship on slavery readily accepts a literary model of historiography, with *Beloved* as the paradigm. Literariness is key here, for narrative and the act of reading together sustain the feeling of loss. It is a feeling that literature produces, not history, because literary texts, as intentional objects, possess silences and ellipses that are structural, whereas silence in nonliterary discourse is not always the sign of an intention. Consider the sentence that structures the last chapter of the novel: “This is not a story to pass on” (*Beloved*, 260). Morrison adopts a trope of negation—paralepsis, or *occultatio*—that is common to a poetics of revelation, one that recalls God’s promise to Moses of a shielded revelation in the book of Exodus:

> And he [the Lord] said [to Moses], I will make all my goodness pass before thee. . . .
> And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.
> And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:
> And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:
> And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.22

God denies the full presence of his divine glory as a response to Moses’s limited ability to withstand the fullness of divine presence. In *Beloved* paralepsis is called on to gentle the reader’s experience of the terror of slavery, and, as in the Bible, the novel’s koanlike phrase (“This is not a story to pass on”) emphasizes the recovered story by appearing to pass over it. Yet such tropes of negation become adequate to the project of history writing only on the turning of the past into an object—“an object of cathexis . . . something that might be lost or found, defended or surrendered”—that is, on the hypostatization of the absence of evidence as the evidence of absence.23

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22 Exodus 33:18–23. Anne-Lise François describes God’s promise as an event that “can have no time of its own, only the tense of a hope or memory” (*Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008], 47).

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This famous quip by a famous character in one of William Faulkner’s less-than-famous novels has settled in as a commonplace in contemporary criticism.24 Of the recent work in slavery studies, Baucom’s Specters of the Atlantic represents perhaps the most tenaciously committed statement of this axiom. Baucom argues that our traumatically hyperfinancialized contemporary moment repeats a capitalist moment from the past, rather than embodying a final stage in the historical unfolding of capitalism (as it might be scripted in a progressive Marxist narrative). The signature of that earlier moment was the incident aboard the slave ship Zong in 1781 when Captain Luke Collingwood threw 132 sick, dying, and healthy slaves overboard so as to recover their value under the terms of the vessel’s insurance bond. What made the Zong incident signature was an act of vanishing achieved, not in the moment when the captain exercised his homicidal intent, but in a prior moment when finance asserted its power to transform the slaves “from bearers of personhood into bearers of an abstract quantum of value.”25 Baucom argues that risk capitalism’s predication of loss value as a condition of value as such continues to the present era, which “inherits its nonimmediate past by intensifying it, by ‘perfecting’ its capital protocols, ‘practicalizing’ its epistemology, realizing its phenomenology as the cultural logic ‘of the entire social-material world’” (29).26 Quoting Walter Benjamin in The Arcades Project, Baucom concludes: “‘It is not . . . that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather . . . what has been comes together with the now to form a constellation’” (29).

There is an accepted truth at the basis of all this—not the idea that the past is made available only through the present, or Michel

24 The line, spoken by Gavin Stevens in Requiem for a Nun (New York: Random House, 1951), 92, is often attributed to Faulkner himself.
26 The traumatic economic convulsion of our present has been so long-lasting and of such global reach that it in many respects affirms every base tenet of Atlanticism. The Great Recession has affirmed Baucom’s thesis, too—for, coming in the wake of the convulsive events of September 2008 (i.e., the implosion of MorganStanley, AIG, collateralized debt obligations, and AAA-rated securities floated on subprime mortgages), it also came in the wake of the appearance of Specters of the Atlantic, published three years earlier.
Foucault’s injunction that “morally and politically what ought to be at stake in historical inquiry is a critical appraisal of the present itself” (Scott, 41), but the notion that the past simply is our present. In this view history aims not to come to terms with the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it really was [Leopold von Ranke]) but to discern structural inequalities repeated in the present. This idea, that the persisting past reduces the present to its mere repetition, captures the essence of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” particularly his statements of the Jetztzeit. Historical materialism consists in continuing, reanimating, and completing the political projects begun in the past: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (thesis 6). Fanning the flames of hope, however metaphorical, transforms the historian from a subject who provides an account of the past to a historical figure in it, “thereby casting the present-day historian in the role of potential hero, or even freedom fighter.”

This critical tendency can be felt even in work that does not march behind the banner of Benjamin’s “Theses.” For Colin (Joan) Dayan, to see the past as autonomous and knowable is to conspire with a legal sorcery that has engendered and exploited slaves and criminals, the oppressed and the outlawed, as exemplars of a negative personhood that the liberal state requires. A past that is periodizable is also, paradoxically, unhistorical; it ignores, for example, that “the shame that is Guantánamo has a history.” To recover “a perplexing legal history too often lost in linearity,” Dayan seeks “to make readers complicit in a world without demarcations such as those between past and present. . . . For those who adhere to a myth of progress or faith in reason, the continuum between past and present must be made to be deeply felt.” For Dayan, critique involves seeing ourselves in league with the victors of history (and thus motivated to disavow that identification). For Hart-

man, historical empathy ought properly to attach to the vanquished. “The time of slavery” is neither to be resigned to nor confused with the past, “for the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath.”

Largely committed to an affective conception of history, Hartman regards “the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat” as events that have “yet to end” (759, 758). (“Can one mourn what has [not] yet ceased happening?” she asks [758].) She solicits empathy with history’s defeated through assertions that time has shown no movement: “Then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead” (759). I have no quarrel with the ethical imperatives and political commitments that motivate much of this work, but I do want to interrogate what seems a pretty consistent tendency here: the promotion of a feeling to an axiom. Morrison’s ethic (“the reader has to feel it, you can’t feel it if he’s in there”) has been transformed into a critical method (per Dayan and Hartman, respectively, “the continuum . . . must be made to be deeply felt”; “the distinction . . . founders on . . . interminable grief”).

As in Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic*, Benjamin’s Angel of History may be taken as the spirit motivating this enterprise, the angel who, with face “turned toward the past” and bearing witness to history’s “piling wreckage upon wreckage,” longs “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (thesis 9; 257). These words, called on often to represent the theater of the historical situation, inspire in historians the hope that, through various means, they may linger as Benjamin’s angel had wished, as well as the faith that the power of redemptive historiography need never come at the price of severing the present’s relation to the past. To repeat my earlier questions: Why

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31 Hartman’s “Time of Slavery” represents a mere moment in the genealogy of melancholy historicism, and one that Hartman herself appears to have superseded, as the fundamentals to her thought shift significantly in *Lose Your Mother*. In the latter text, dispossession forms the condition of relation for blacks in the New World, and the irredeemable past the grounds of any historiography of slavery. The title alone signals the book’s deep attachment to what I am calling the abandonment thesis.

32 It is curious what a prominent role Benjamin has been made to play in the recent melancholic turn, not least the function that his “Theses” has served in advancing it, considering his own quite explicit caution against “left melancholy.” See
must we predicate having an ethical relation to the past on the idea that there is continuity between that past and our present? What kind of history would permit one not only “to stay” with the dead but to rouse them from their sleep?

Bersani might answer, “A history that has forgotten how much it shares with theology,” for a good deal of criticism written in the redemptive vein starts from a conception of modernity as postlapsarian. Following Benjamin’s division of the world into “something inauthentic but familiar” and “something authentic but lost,” the melancholic privileges, as he does, whatever has been resigned to the category of loss. Here the office of art is to afford a kind of repetition that “repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience” (Bersani, *Culture*, 1). And, in taking on Benjamin’s theologically tinged vision of a “lost wholeness” or “fallen being” as a spur to critique’s will-to-redemption (*Culture*, 53), critics who write in that vein have enshrined an authentic origin as something to be not merely regretted but resituated as the telos of all historicist thought: “It is a mode of being toward which we can aspire, which can be ‘restored’ (or perhaps even realized for the first time). The conceptual visibility of this ontological preference depends on its presentation in historical metaphors, its translation into a temporal priority” (*Culture*, 55). In short, Bersani assesses, the commitment to the idea that art has a redemptive function depends on “a devaluation of historical experience and of art” (*Culture*, 1). In line with his view that redemptive criticism is a refusal or an inability to reckon with the true alterity of the past, an apt reckoning with historical experience ought to require a failure or short-circuiting of the redemptive function.

If in what I have said to this point it has felt as if I were writing the epitaph to the *Beloved* moment, then your instincts have been admirably astute. Indeed, Morrison herself has set the conditions for this


34 I thank David Kurnick for reminding me of Bersani’s critique.
elegy, for her 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, opens the door to an appreciation of the slave past as it falls away, as that which falls away—a separate-ness resistant to being either held or read in melancholic terms. The form of *A Mercy* thus undoes a crucial aspect of the historical ethics that *Beloved* played such a pivotal role in bringing about. The critical question remains whether the undoing of the affective history project is something that Morrison intended, that is, something done by rather than to her. The answer to this question rests on an assessment of Morrison’s relation to the thesis that our present was forged when slavery and race conjoined to create a history both inevitable and determined. To assess the continued pertinence of this thesis to Morrison’s oeuvre (and its remaining salience to our thought generally) requires sticking with Morrison. All epitaphs aside, if at times it feels as if all we can do is think through Morrison, then so be it.

**Morrison’s Undoing**

It was hard to figure out how to die. —Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

*Beloved* issues from a call for an accounting: a daughter’s death at the hands of her mother compels a universal demand for judgment. That call may be universal, touching those who knew or knew of Margaret Garner, who know or know of Sethe, but it solicits a judgment that most persons cannot satisfy. Morrison would admit as much, proffering the book as a necessary prop for the only person who could: “I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn’t, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed” (Darling, *five*). Governed by this need to account for death, *Beloved* secures the idea (figured in its ghost) that we may strive to restore meaning to death as an epistemological goal. In this regard *Beloved* reads as the paradigm of a critical moment, of the general drive in critical theory to

35 Heather Love makes a compelling case that “descriptive reading” draws into focus *Beloved*’s “critique of historical reclamation,” Morrison’s expressed commitments to the latter project aside, and it is to this reading that I attribute my first sense that Morrison is more attuned to turning against herself than those inspired by her tend to grant (see Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 [2010]: 375).
make death an aspect of knowledge, to “recover” it for knowledge, as a means of articulating how the past structures our present: for instance, social death, civil death, “necro citizenship,” necropolitics, homo sacer.36

A Mercy shares with Beloved a concern with the destruction of slavery, the production of slavery, and the mother-daughter bond. A wound in that bond inaugurates both plots, constituting, for Morrison, a mythic gesture from which all others flow. Morrison makes separation and fearful estrangement conditions of relation, so kinship appears not a given in the world but something forged. But in A Mercy, rather than kill the child, Morrison hands her off, and this decision, by leaving much else intact, seems deliberately to negate the infanticide in Beloved. In the abandonment of death Morrison has made abandonment itself a primary concern.

That concern is with the fate of Florens, a sixteen-year-old slave girl adopted eight years earlier, at her mother’s urgent prodding, by a homesteader, Jacob Vaark, in partial settlement of a debt owed him by a Portuguese slave trader, Senhor D’Ortega. It is 1690, and Vaark takes Florens from Chesapeake Bay to “Mary’s Land where [he] does business” and to his seat in that unstructured land, Milton.37 There Florens joins a group of women who orbit around Vaark, or “Sir,” as she calls him: his wife, Rebekka, or “Mistress” to all the servants; a Native American named Messalina, who had her name “shortened to Lina to signal a sliver of hope” (47); and Sorrow, a young woman who survived a shipwreck and was raised by the sawyers who discovered her before she joined the Vaark sodality. A “united front of dismay” (53),


the women form a society of orphans when Vaark succumbs to smallpox, with Rebekka the widow at their center. “Belonging to no one,” they “became wild game for anyone” (58). The Vaark community also includes the white indentured servants Scully and Willard, lovers to one another; “the blacksmith,” a free black man and Florens’s sometime lover, whom she is sent to retrieve in hopes that he might cure Rebekka when she contracts smallpox herself; and Florens’s mother, referred to only as minha mãe (Portuguese: my mother) and most palpably present in a dispatch addressed to her estranged daughter that closes the novel.

Florens’s abandonment by both mother and lover and the women’s abandonment before the world generally, though critical themes in the novel, appear also to be a symptom of it, a trope for the standoffishness of the novel itself. Morrison’s prose has often isolated readers by depriving them of the usual coordinates in time and space. A Mercy intensifies that aesthetic: the chapters oscillate, confusingly at first, between Florens’s first-person narration and a third-person omniscience, with the apparent goal of isolating the book itself, leaving it, too, with no place in the world. The novel reads like an archive of dead letters. What distinguishes these dispatches, however, is that their failure to arrive comes from having never been sent.38

Failed scenes of address pervade the novel. For instance, Florens’s narrative, written on the walls and floor of a room in the unfinished mansion that Vaark started before his untimely death, resembles a note that one might leave a roommate or a lover, which stubbornly waits for an addressee to come to it: “You will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places” (158). No one is likely to do so, of course, as the house stands not simply incomplete but empty, Rebekka having prohibited all from entering her husband’s “profane monument to himself” (44). And the failure of this address is perfectly complete, incapable of being undone, because the blacksmith cannot read it (“You read the world but not the letters of talk” [160]) and the

38 The chapters written in the first person are letters in the figurative sense; that is, they read like autonomous documents that, taken together, make up a weave of the characters’ failed attempts to address one another (Florens to the blacksmith, the minha mãe to Florens). Thus a novel about the late seventeenth-century rise of racial slavery appears to resuscitate the literary genre that arose at that time—the epistolary novel.
minha mãe will not (“All this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her” [161]).

Moreover, failed address is signaled as often by a dispatch’s form as by its fate. The novel’s first sentence (“Don’t be afraid”) sounds as if it were addressed to the reader, but it is not—it is addressed to the blacksmith. It is some time before Florens is revealed as the speaker, long after she has nullified any possibility of sending or receiving the right message by endlessly musing about her narrative’s proper genre. “You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like” (3), she invites, only to undercut that solicitation with the observation that “confession we tell not write as I am doing now” (6). Confession or not, this chapter certainly anticipates the irresolution of those to follow. Clarity ostensibly emerges at the end of the narrative, when mother explains to daughter the motives behind her abandonment, but here too confusion seems to be the order of the day, for though this last chapter reads like a self-exculpatory epistle, it is unanchored, without identification of source or recipient, which leaves the reader wondering where this bit of writing is. To read A Mercy requires attentiveness to who is speaking, and to whom, and through which medium, and in which genre, but the novel evades capture by resetting all these conditions of utterance with every turn of the page.

Curious to know how readers orient themselves in this environment, I have asked a number of friends, colleagues, and students what they think A Mercy is all about. The responses fall largely into two intriguingly contradictory camps. One set of readers notes a world where racial distinctions have not yet formed and much is up for grabs. “1682 and Virginia was still a mess” (11), the omniscient narrator observes early on, a perspective confirmed on the ground by many of the characters. Vaark saw himself as “making a place out of no place” (12), and Scully takes himself to have stepped into a world unformed, one “before Creation . . . [with] dark matter out there, thick, unknowable, aching to be made into a world” (156). And while the indentured whites languish unpaid for their labors, a free black such as the blacksmith does not: “[He] had rights . . . and privileges, like Sir. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor” (45). The other camp of readers registers characters motivated by a desire to escape a world where racial formation already exerts a determinative force. “Barbados” was the name of this force, for
as Florens’s mother confesses, “It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita” (165). But in abandoning Florens to a new world in which “there is no protection but there is difference,” mother unwittingly enmeshes daughter in the very tangle of forces that she hoped to escape (166). Florens’s Virginia is choked with “new laws . . . eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; . . . granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; . . . [and] compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death.” These laws have their intended effect: they “separated and protected all whites from all others forever” (10). As John Updike observes, in affirmation of this second view, A Mercy “circles around a vision, both turgid and static, of a new world turning old.”

Race too, then, is something of an orphan: present but precarious, unburdened, ungrounded, not yet operating to its maximum potential. Or, better, the racial scripts and beliefs that are said today to make up slavery’s legacy have yet to settle into a lexicon. Jostling nominatives describe what the characters think they are perceiving: “all whites,” “the Europes” (54), “the ‘Black Man’” (109), “children of Ham” (92), “negrita,” “Afric” (111). Likewise, race has not yet congealed into protocols of ownership and dominion. Sorrow was “accepted, not bought, by Sir” (51), though African; Lina, “bought . . . from the Presbyterians” (52), though Native American; Scully, “leased to the Synod” (153), and Willard, “sold for seven years to a Virginia planter” (198), and each in turn “exchange[d] for land under lease from Sir” (7), though both are white. One can even hear race’s impotence in Florens’s rotten English:

These thoughts are sad in me, so I make me think of you [the blacksmith] instead. How you say your work in the world is strong and beautiful. I think you are also. No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that. Not like Will or Scully but like Sir. I don’t know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory. When Sir’s gate is done and you are away so long, I walk sometimes to search you. (69)

Defiant of grammatical rule, Florens’s speech confounds temporality and agency. It appears intended to disorient readers. And lacking the

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signatures of both black grammar and idiom, it sounds like no presently recognizable Bajan dialect, slave cant, or southern seaboard creole. Like so much else in this novel, it is of its own world.

Morrison has produced a text of marked ungeniality, even by the measure of *Beloved*. In that comparison *A Mercy* appears less invested in either unmasking or bearing witness to historical trauma and more in securing what Stanley Cavell calls a kind of “reproachfulness” by building a set of “defenses against being read,” seeking no given assembly of hearers or readers, and repelling every approach (*New yet Unapproachable, 12*). In that regard, perhaps nothing could better figure the novel’s standoffishness than what Florens describes as her “talking on stone” (6). But why should a novel about a denial of filial claim work so hard to make it hard for us to claim it? For us to get a handle on it or feel directly addressed by it?

Now might be an ideal moment to return to the ripple that sets the plot in motion—Florens’s abandonment by her mother—and to consider it in light of failed futures and recovered pasts. It is almost a commonplace that the filial bond between parents and children protects a future of mutual belonging, with abandonment irreducibly figured in *A Mercy* as both betrayal and denial of that future. Florens’s mother takes pains in her chapter to explain that the abandonment was always in the name of something, if not better, then at the very least other—that “a mercy” was specifically intended to serve the end (if it could serve only one) of “difference.” The future—ascetic and reduced to such compressed aperture—feels like “no future” at all. 40 In this, it comes to resemble Scott’s “failed future,” whose lack of specifiable or retrievable content is precisely as it was meant to be, without redemption or redress, completion or authentication. This rigorously attenuated future serves to concentrate the abandonment’s force and consequence (“the insistence, the pulsive *force*, of negativity” [Edelman, 4]), and we begin to perceive the effect of that force on the novel’s narrative synopsis: a character, in giving up a future with her child, aban-

40 While not an endorsement of the death drive, Morrisonian abandonment at the very least taps a resistance to what Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism,” that is, an organizing principle of communal relation and social viability that sets ideological limits on contemporary political discourse (*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004], 2).
dons not only that child but also any attachment to the idea of a future with her. The *child*, the *future*, and *kinship* are all claimed by the gesture of abandonment and promote that gesture to the status of narrative cause. Morrison arguably wants to add *novel* to this array, to the extent that she insinuates abandonment within the textual capillaries of *A Mercy*. But why leave the reader stranded along with the characters?

*A Mercy’s* ungeniality implicates the reader in the novel’s internal structure of foreclosed claims. It secures a set of “counter-transferences to its desired and feared ‘readers,’” a set of resistances to “their (fantasied) transferences to it” (Cavell, *New yet Unapproachable*, 12). What end does the ghost of *Beloved* serve, if not that of making possible the text’s investment in the reader’s transferences? For what else does the ghost’s ontology function, if not to form a bridge between the book’s characters and its readers and thus make the act of reading an act of judgment in (and of) the historical past? But where *Beloved* calls us back to witness in the mode of melancholic historicism, *A Mercy* abandons us to a more baffled, cut-off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past. And where the former novel requires transference from readers to characters to construct an ethical relation to the past, the latter’s transposition of abandonment from character to author (from *minha mãe* to Morrison) raises a bulwark or countertransference against that very possibility. If I reconsidered my narrative synopsis in light of what I am calling Morrison’s “transposition,” it might read as follows: a character gives up a future with her child, and this abandonment, through its transposition from character to author, allows the novelist better to represent the past as the particularity and crisp actuality of a thing or relation that used to exist. We are meant to harbor that relation without looking at it too closely—to see it as something other than a haunting. If *Beloved* incites melancholy, *A Mercy* incites mourning—the very kind of mourning, as I have suggested, that affiliates with a waking or dawning rooted in repetitive divestment. By representing history as a recalcitrant orphanhood, the novel awakens us to the past in its concretion.

*A Mercy* conjures up a moment of pure possibility, before a decision has been made and history begins to rumble down the path that leads to us, and to get here, Morrison settles on a moment, not when things come together but when things fall apart. But how can the effort to get back to another beginning amount to a reversal of the melancholy
attachment to beginnings as such? With the ambiguous genitive of this section’s title—“Morrison’s Undoing”—I am implying that there are at least two plausible accounts of the relation between A Mercy and Beloved: one assumes continuity between the texts (and takes the undoing to be something done to Morrison); the other assumes discontinuity (and takes the undoing to be something done by her). In the first case, the argument is that Beloved preserves the view that once slavery couples with race, a history both inevitable and determined results, and all the pathos in A Mercy derives from the novel’s recognition that history might have been otherwise. Those predisposed to accept that the effect of an author’s oeuvre is cumulative might also be inclined to accept this view, but this is not my inclination. I believe that there is a deliberate disjunction between the texts and that Morrison here demonstrates the limits and ultimate impossibility of the affective history project she has so capably inspired. In A Mercy Morrison touches down at the moment before slavery acquired its “legacy,” that is, its power to claim us. By doing so, she arrives counterintuitively at a moment before the origin, at a moment before slavery coupled with race with determined results. By embracing precariousness and indeterminacy, Morrison espouses Nathaniel Mackey’s concern, in Bedouin Hornbook, with “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion” and makes this her concern as well.41 For in A Mercy, unlike in Beloved, once the filial bond is broken, its affiliative form (i.e., racial kinship) appears no more ready-to-hand as a substitute. We seem less held together by race here, and more together in our abandonment.

In this latest meditation on race and slavery Morrison throws into question the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism through which to apprehend and understand the black political present, by refusing to make the slave past the progenitor of the existential condition of black people, or of black people alone. Morrison invites us to think about what it means to be held in the grip of slavery but not of race. She makes a possible offering into what it might mean to be, in another way of naming this, “postracial”—not as neoliberals tend to

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41 See n. 5. Fred Moten glosses Mackey’s formulation to mean “a beginning whose origin is never fully recoverable, never operative as the end of an imagined return” (In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003], 73).
celebrate this condition (as a mark of the end of racism) but in the more analytically purposeful sense that the logic of racial slavery does not fully describe or capture racial injustice in the present. The past is here to be appreciated as a falling away—slavery to be appreciated in the failure to make its racial legacy present. Is it possible to imagine, then, that Morrison’s effort to articulate the formative moments of blackness, slavery, and racial identity is simply the flip side of their death (the falling away of their conjunction) in our historical present? Are we being invited to ponder how thoroughly we cannot conceptualize the order in which we are living—to see that we have arrived in a world of “no protection but . . . difference”?

Stephen Best is associate professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. He is author of The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession (2004) and coeditor (with Sharon Marcus) of “The Way We Read Now,” a special issue of Representations (2009). He is working on a book-length critique of the recovery imperative in the historiography of slavery.