Presenting Oprah Winfrey, Her Films, and African American Literature

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CHAPTER FOUR

Wanderlust, Hysteria, and Insurrection: (Re)presenting the "Beloved" *Sweet Home Men*

Robert E. Randolph, Jr.

> I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia.
>
> Toni Morrison[1]

> My original intention in making *Beloved* was the same as Toni Morrison's intention in writing the book: I wanted people to be able to feel deeply on a very personal level what it means to be a slave, what slavery did to a people, and also to be liberated by that knowledge. I never felt so free and so joyful as when I was working on *Beloved*.
>
> Oprah Winfrey[2]

As Morrison states, *Beloved* is about remembrance, an act imbued with as much memory as disavowal. That is to say, people are often compelled to paradoxically commemorate trauma even as they are desperately trying to forget it. However, for Oprah Winfrey *Beloved* represents liberation, a kind of freedom obtained from empathy, a key tenet of "the gospel of Oprah." After all, no

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other modern American has been more publicly vocal about the causes of empowerment and self-actualization as much as Winfrey. To this end, the "Queen of All Media" pushes the boundary of African American representation both on the "small and big" screens, often choosing African American literature as her location of cultural exchange. A voracious reader, Winfrey's affinity for classic African American literature flourished as a young girl. However, no book activated her imagination or spirit more than Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*. Oprah felt a visceral connection to the book. "I felt absorbed by it," she writes, "I felt I was in the interior of the words.... I felt in some way it was my own remembering."[3] This moment convinced her of the necessity to bring *Beloved* to the American public; she bought the film rights to the novel and served as the film's executive producer and lead actress. Her influence is so evident that Jonathan Demme, the film's director, referred to Winfrey as the "mother of the movie."[4] Winfrey reiterates this point: "I knew it, I knew Sethe, when I encountered her I felt that *she* was in some way a part of myself...I was overcome with the idea of bringing *her* to life."[5]

With its emphasis on matrilineal heritage, the main characters—Sethe, Beloved, and Denver—are extremely central to the narrative and serve as a collective repository of cultural and communal memory.[6] Without equivocation, *Beloved* the novel is a woman's text[7]. In addition, while the film focuses on the lives of Sethe and her daughters, Morrison's novel details the lives of several male characters that are not sufficiently portrayed in the film. As Deborah Ayer asserts, "What goes on in the ghostly subtext of Beloved is an intense debate over the meaning of manhood and the possibility for enduring heterosexual love."[8] Indeed, these men represent "certain absences [that] are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves."[9] Because these absences are so conspicuous, my analysis seeks to foster continued scholarship and criticism about portrayals of Black men in contemporary Black films.

In this analysis, I contextualize the themes of (Black) spectatorship, aesthetic appreciation, and cinematic politics of Black masculine representation. I contend that because the bodies and

minds of these three "Sweet Home" men are also sites of terror and exploitation, they equally symbolize the collective cultural values and memory of the Black slave community, and that their representation, or lack thereof, in the film signifies the epitome of White (masculine) privilege and power. If indeed *Beloved* operates in what Manthia Diawara calls "dominant cinema," then the glaring absences and/or woefully wrought images of these men reifies American notions of Black nationhood as broken, irredeemable, and feckless.[10] Despite the coterie of Black film critics and scholars, I am inspired by Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon's *Screen Saviors*, both of which evaluate Black representation as a function of White identity politics. While Morrison confines *Playing in the Dark* to the realm of literary production, her text provides an invaluable treatise on whiteness and its origins. Likewise, Vera and Gordon contend that "for the majority of Americans, Hollywood's movies are a constant source of images, ideas, and 'data' about the social world."[11] I begin by discussing *Beloved's* production, primarily analyzing the directorship of Jonathan Demme. Then I address the lives of Paul D, Halle, and Sixo; all three men were central to the novel but have dubious depictions in the film. Paul D, "the last of the Sweet Home men" figures prominently in the film as a walking blues idiom, a wanderer who shows up at 124 Bluestone Road and becomes Sethe's "sight" of memory. Next, Halle, Sethe's husband, is reduced to unbridled hysteria (traditionally attributed to women), and represents Black men who broke under the psychological pressure of slavery. Finally, though only a fleeting image in the film, Sixo exemplifies Morrison's notion of an authentic, self-actualized masculinity. His defiance and insurrection leads to his eventual torture and death. Perhaps these depictions provided too difficult to translate to film, a medium, which functions to reiterate, at times, racist and sexist notions of African Americans.

Cracking the Back of the Novel

Toni Morrison readily admitted that her students often asked why her books had not been "reinvigorated" by cinematic adaptation.

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Without explicitly commenting on the pitfalls and politics of film adaptation and filmmaking, she gently chided them with a bit of quick wit. "I was always annoyed," she said, "when my students would ask, 'When is there going to be a movie?' I told them that a novel is not what happens before the movie. Why can't it just be a book?"[12] So infatuated with the book, this concern seems to have never crossed Oprah's mind. She personally called Morrison, offered her a check for the exclusive film rights to the book, and extended opportunity for Morrison to serve as the film's screenwriter.[13] Morrison quickly responded by saying, "I don't do films."[14] Morrison instinctively knew that adapting a novel, even her own, was much like wading through treacherous waters. Furthermore, Howard Suber, film professor and critic, asserts that "if the book was very popular . . . the filmmaker has severe limitations on how much can be changed."[15] In other words, readers expect an "accurate" depiction of the novel, that any significant deviation from the "sacred" text is viewed as sacrilegious. While a literary text is usually produced by one author (and perhaps an editor or two) for a specific audience, bringing a film to screen is tantamount to writing-by-committee when one considers the producers, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, financiers, and so on. Thus, a film may not necessarily represent the aims of any one person; there may or may not be a balance between artistic and capitalistic agendas.

Although the novel is concerned with the breadth of Black experiences and cultures, the screenplay is not. Akosua Busia, a Black writer, began the process of adapting the novel with a 28-page treatment and subsequent screenplay. However, she was quickly replaced with Richard LaGravense and Adam Brooks because, according to Demme, Busia "tried to put too much of the book" into the screenplay (as quoted in Conner 215). Only through a lawsuit did Busia eventually receive credit for "cracking the back of the novel."[16] The fact that two White male screenwriters received primary credit for a film about the lives of ex-slaves, especially Black women, and that Jonathan Demme directed it became a consistent criticism. However, Mia Mask warns against any racial essentialism, noting Demme's two documentaries (*Haiti: Dreams of Democracy* [1987], and *Cousin Bobby*

[1991]), which dealt with Black subjects and cultures. Indeed race or ethnicity should not serve as the primary requisite for a directorship, but one may question the motives and commitments of directors for doing such cinematic cultural work.

Oprah talks about the process of finding a director: "I talked to a lot of them–Black ones, White ones, female, foreign. Some didn't share the vision I had, some had other commitments, and some told me that they didn't feel they knew enough about the Black experience to take on the project."[17] Note that "some" directors have designated the topic of *American* slavery as a *Black* experience. Perhaps Oprah does as well, she confesses, "Now, it's no secret that Jonathan is a White male, and I know to some folks that raises a red flag.... If you knew his heart, it wouldn't even be a question. Jonathan has a big *Black* heart."[18] Perhaps Oprah's comments were an effort to preempt some of the criticism that still haunts Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*.[19] In effect, Oprah's observation of Demme's "big Black heart" ironically functions as an authenticating document.[20] Thus, Oprah casts Demme as a slave narrator, as someone who not only knows about the Black experience but also, in fact, knows it intimately. During an interview with Danny Glover, who plays Paul D, Charlie Rose gestures toward the controversy of a White director taking up a text written by a Black author asking, "Jonathan Demme is not black. Did it make a difference?"[21] Glover refused to acquiesce to racial innuendo and viewed the crux of the film as "elevating the process of being a human being." Thus, Demme's race, at least to Glover, is inconsequential to his connection and commitment to accurate portrayals of the human condition. Days later, Demme affirmed Glover's rebuttal when he admitted to Rose that he had read the script before he read the novel, and that he was taken aback emotionally, and cried when he came to the "Clearing Scene with Baby Suggs."[22]

As early as 1990, Demme had expressed an interest in making films on "black subjects, racial subjects, [and] interracial subjects."[23] However, he seemed to express a lack of sensitivity about Black life when he suggested that the cast of *Beloved* "be given special lessons in dialect and accent." Morrison discouraged Demme's proposal.[24] Valerie Smith views Black vernacular

markers in Black films as an "authenticating document," an aural quality that attempts to convince the viewer that the director's endeavor is accurate and trustworthy.[25] That Demme would even suggest this poorly thought-out strategy traipses blithely into cinematic minstrelsy.

Mask suggests that Winfrey chose Demme, an "A-listed" director because of the considerable prestige and heft he could lend to the project.[26] By asking whether Demme could navigate "racial representation," Mask inquires: "[Would] Demme understand Morrison's long-term project of examining constructions of blackness?"[27] That is, does Demme have the faculty to access/imagine Black ancestral memory? Again, one of the primary questions of this examination hinges not upon racial/ethnic identity but cultural acuity: Can white filmmakers obfuscate real/imagined national, racial, or political allegiances to accurately depict meticulous cinematic renditions of Black life?

Let the Grown Men Come

While *Beloved* represents a departure from African American films of the past five decades, dealing with the psychological affects of slavery, the production of the film was flawed from the beginning. The first misstep was to conceptualize and contextualize the film as simply a story about the interior lives of women.[28] "It's an anthem movie for women," Joe Roth, chairman of Walt Disney Studios, exclaimed.[29] Everything about this movie coalesces around women, and viewers may be tempted to call it a feminist film. However, to assume that *Beloved* is just (or simply) a feminist novel undermines Morrison's artistic aim. In an interview, Morrison asserts, "I detest and loathe [those categories]. I think it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of feminist tract."[30]

Morrison may have chosen Margaret Garner's story as the primary site of "rememory," but she had plenty of Black male slave narrators to draw upon, men like Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass, and William Grimes. Moreover, Morrison's text primarily explores the structures of communities and less about

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individuals. She emphasizes this point, "[Slavery] has to be the interior life of some people, a small group of people, and everything that they do is impacted on by the horror of slavery, but they are also people."[31] Thus the question most often answered in these narratives deals with how enslaved persons and their communities might have begun to constitute a pragmatic idea of freedom? How do enslaved persons, despite the psychological horrors, take ownership of their mind and body? While Sethe proves useful for this inquiry, Paul D does as well. His journey starts at Sweet Home, continues on to Georgia and Delaware, and ends at 124 Bluestone Road. Separated from Sethe by 18 years of walking and a load of misery, he enters Sethe's yard. At this point in the novel, all we know is that he is the "Last of the Sweet Home Men," but we know nothing of where he has been and what he has seen. For 18 years, Paul D has been a walking man—a blues idiom that bespeaks life's uncanny charm and grotesqueness, a man worn smooth by life's horrors and hopes.[32] Paul D's wanderlust is not completely driven by a desire to roam but by survival.

Paul D's dearth of representation looms heavily over the film; most notably his "post-slavery traumas are abridged in the motion picture in favor of emphasis on Sethe's self-sabotage, trauma, re-memory, and guilt."[33] Paul D's time on and his escape from a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia are wholly excised from the film. The circumstances of his confinement provide one of the most bitter moments of the novel. He and his fellow inmates are subjected daily to the lascivious nature of White prison guards:

> "Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "Hungry, nigger?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "Here you go."
> Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus.... Convinced he was next, Paul D retched—vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one *decided to skip the new man for the time being* lest his pants and shoes got soiled by nigger puke.[34]

Although Morrison does not directly show Paul D's abuse, the reader cannot glibly believe he was spared the indignity of such a trespass. To avoid a possible NC-17 (No Children 17 and Under Admitted) rating, Mia Mask speculates that Paul D's sexual abuse was excluded from the film.[35] Such renderings of Black male sexual abuse are difficult to digest, but they could prove to be just as powerful as those of Black women. Moreover, depictions of Black male sexual abuse, while lamentable, are insightful, for it denies the "economy of stereotype."[36] Here, Morrison resists any Black nationalistic notions of Black men as wholly immune to sexual abuse; and her presentation is not only allegoric but scathingly demonstrative. While most readers of African American fiction unhesitatingly accept depictions of female sexual abuse, Morrison's images of sexually traumatized Black males constitute a new literary and historiographical sensibility. Indeed, African American literary fiction scarcely illustrates this particular theme. However, two nonfiction examples readily come to mind: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and a often overlooked passage in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In Chapter 10 of Douglass's narrative, he catalogs the vile cruelties of Edward Covey, known county wide as a first-rate "nigger breaker." At various intervals of this chapter, Covey whips Douglass for minor infractions or for no reason at all, insisting that Douglass shed his clothing before the beatings. In one instance, Covey demoralizes him to such an extent, Douglass begins to contemplate suicide. The scenes of this chapter are replete with images of sadistic bondage, torture, and humiliation, themes also present in Harriet Jacobs's story of Luke, who is often chained to his master's bed. "[Some] days," Jacobs explains, "he was not allowed to wear anything but his shirt, in order to be in readiness to be flogged."[37] However, even with Jacobs's own knowledge of the demoralized Luke, she proclaims: "Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."[38]

Additionally, Morrison riffs on Black male sexual abuse again when Paul D is raped by Beloved in the woodshed, the site of

her murder. Prior to this scene, Paul D had questioned Beloved about her origins, where she was from, and how she had come to be at 124. Her cryptic and elusive responses only seem to embolden Paul D more. He continues interrogating her until she cries and Sethe comes to her aid. As a result of this exchange, Paul D and Beloved view each other as a threat to their plans of a happy home with Sethe. Beloved fixes Paul D and begins to move him, first from Sethe's bed to the kitchen, then from the kitchen to the woodshed. The fact that Paul D cannot control his movement reminds him of his time on the chain gang. Once again, he finds himself confined, at the whim of another, and without agency. This injury is further compounded one night when Beloved visits him in the woodshed. Initially, she asks him to touch her "on the inside part." He rebuffs her and she decides to rape him. During this scene, the red light signifies blood and sacrifice and not ecstasy or eroticism. Although Paul D is greeted with the same red light when he first enters 124, at the climax of his rape, he repeatedly screams "red heart," a reference that alludes to his rusted-shut tobacco tin. The contents of this tin are, of course, all those traumas he has endured. However, it is this last final act by Beloved that *unmans* Paul D, thus ripping the lid off his tin of well-guarded trials and travails. The significance of this scene may be lost on an audience that has not read the book prior to viewing the film. Again, a Black man is the victim rather than victimizer, which American society so often imagines. Demme's "revision of Black male sexuality may well be [Beloved's] most radical contribution to the African American film tradition."[39] Beloved reinjures a soul already wracked with grief. Humiliated and bereft of his manhood, Paul D leaves 124 soon after.

In the film, Sethe invites Paul D into the house, and he is immediately greeted with the sounds and sights of 124's *haint*. While inundated with undulating red light and grotesque images, he perseveres and enters the house. No sooner than Sethe and Paul D begin to kiss and embrace each other, the baby ghost starts throwing chairs and tables. Paul D "beats back" the baby ghost, an act that marks a return of decidedly masculine energy to the house, thus solidifying his messianic and paternalistic role. Reflexively, Paul D's suffering requires no redemptive male/God

to assuage, but a woman with "iron-eyes and a back to match" whose pain equals his own. Because of their shared persecution and cathartic bond, he rejoices in the sight of Sethe, and the house becomes a site of repose for a spiritual and physically ailing Black man.

Paul D clings to Sethe and positions her as the precipice of his salvation. With her, he gains his bearings and contemplates a lengthy pause to his wandering. At the first sign of the ghost, he rethinks his stay at 124, and he advises Sethe to move. She refuses, telling him, "I got a tree on my back and haint in my house and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more leave, no running from nothing, you hear me, I will never run from another thing on this Earth." This repudiation causes Paul D to ponder his wanderlust. While sleeping next to Sethe during his first night at 124, Paul D's tobacco tin contents are rendered into what Conner calls "newsreel-style black and white flashes."[40] Demme's decision to cast these poorly wrought memories in such a manner seems arbitrary and incoherent. Rather than exploring these memories, the audience witnesses Paul D twitching and writhing, in a rather cliché manner, which signifies the disruptive nature of the memories. What is fascinating, at least for this project, is how these "newsreel" remembrances are primarily relegated to images of men in the throes of agony, hysteria, and bereavement. In other words, the images revolve around implements of suffering, both physical and psychological. There are *no* fond memories, not even remembrances of Sethe's arrival at Sweet Home. Simply, his past does not merely haunt but stalks, denying Paul D a moment of peace. These harrowing experiences, one may conclude, leads him to seek a home with Sethe at 124; and the fate of these men, Halle and Sixo, lead him to stop walking (read: running). We see an image of Halle holding Beloved, then him in chains screaming something incoherently in the loft; we also see a picture of a younger Paul D with the bit in his mouth and wildness in his eyes, and finally, we witness Halle giving in to his madness and smearing butter all over his face. During these flashing images, Sethe's voice is heard decrying how Schoolteacher's nephews took her milk. The next

day, Sethe's words about "no more running" have taken root, and he tells her about his plans to look for work. Therefore, his desires to move about and move on are stayed by his love for Sethe, his keen sense of belonging, and his willingness to be rooted to the land (much like Brother, an old, wise tree at Sweet Home).

Paul D's character is never fully fleshed out, and viewers may underestimate the importance of Paul D's return at the end of the film. Perhaps the "iron-eyed" Sethe is stronger than most of the men in her life—though severely wounded by the "shamelessness of life"—she escapes, survives, and resigns to live a happy life with her children. Dreadfully, that happiness is short lived (28 days, Sethe tells Paul D), and "the Misery" swiftly snatched away all that she loved. After Beloved is exorcized from 124, Sethe still cannot rid her psyche of "the Misery." Paul D returns and offers to care for the still-ailing Sethe; she thinks "no," fully accepting her own brokenness.[41] However, after reluctantly looking into Paul D's eyes, she recognizes "the thing in him, the blessedness, that made him the kind of man who can walk in a house and make the women cry. Cry and tell him things they only told each other."[42] I submit that Paul D's "blessedness" is his kinship with women: the fact that Black men were, under the slavery regime, routinely, and perhaps systematically, subjected to the same sexual trauma as women. While women and men may physically experience sexual trauma differently, the act of sexual violence is based in the same ideologies of power and denial of agency, which is felt regardless of sex or gender performance. Despite Sethe's admonishment earlier in the novel, Paul D empathizes with "a coloredwoman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you."[43] Morrison implies by the end of the novel that Sethe and Paul D are, quite simply, soul mates; they have experienced and survived sexual horrors by the same tormentors. Despite obvious gender differences, Morrison's novel asserts that the Black experience, especially during the slave era, is characterized by the same distresses: trauma, loss, and so on. Paul D and Sethe's *shared* memories not only necessitate their tension but also resolves it. All of these aforementioned nuances crumble under the strain of adaptation, which ultimately claims another casualty, Halle.

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The seeds of Halle's descent into madness are sown when he agrees to be educated by his owner, Mr. Garner. Although he offers to teach all of his Sweet Home men the alphabet, Halle is the only one to accept. Halle's rationale was that "if you can't count they can cheat you. If you can't read they can beat you."[44] However, the other Sweet Home men mock his naiveté. They understand, all too well, that they had already been cheated and beaten by the mere fact of their servitude, a concept that escapes Halle until he witnesses Sethe's violation. All rationality and logic abruptly pivots at this moment, and he succumbs to the realities of slavery—affliction, sorrow, and strife. In essence, he surrenders his sanity to learn this lesson. With the "milk they took on his mind," he smears butter and clabber over his face.[45] However, this scene is scantily depicted in the film, with only a few seconds of actual screen time. If Halle's psychological devastation had been extended and left for the audience to ponder, its intensity would have been powerful and could have reminded/introduced viewers of an awful truth: some people did not survive the ravages of slavery. The image of Halle's butter-play is so vivid and disturbing, a sign of disillusionment and agony, it leaves Paul D bereft and becomes an addition to his tobacco tin. Again, as with Paul D, Morrison unflinchingly subverts hegemonic modes of Black masculinity. However, the complex tapestry of variant Black male emotion is withheld from the audience.

Halle's story is integral in several ways. A veritable list of "what ifs" abound if he is simply excised from the text—both the film and novel. First, Halle, through his actions, set into motion a whole host of events that reverberate throughout the novel. What if he had not bought Baby Suggs out of slavery? What if Halle had escaped the clutches of his own madness and made to 124 Bluestone Road? And the queries could go on and on. One could argue that Halle surrendered to the pressure of slavery, that the aftermath of such trauma was not only detrimental but fatal. Sadly, Halle's demise serves as a prime example of slaves who never escaped the slavery with their psyches intact.

Though Garner allows Halle to "buy" Baby Suggs out of slavery, this act alone is not at all an emblem of manhood, independence,

or humanity; it is only an illusion of these properties. The act of buying an individual out of slavery, even one's mother, still signifies at the very least a complicit consent of human trafficking. Halle's intention is well meaning; he wants to buy her the one thing he cannot give her. However, at some level, his purchase, as it were, means that he is participating in a system that attempts to discern the value of a human life. Undoubtedly, there was a sense of achievement for Halle, whose original plan was to purchase Sethe and his children as well. Indeed, it is this ingenuity and gumption that attracts Sethe; he does not vie for Sethe's attention in so much as he earns it. But this pride, if I can call it that, is his undoing; for it lulls him into a false sense of manhood, one defined by his education and labor and not his spirit. In a system that puts a premium on hard work and labor, Halle would be at the top. He has not learned, as Paul D has, at the end of the novel, that manhood is not a matter of what he does but who he is, that no further definition is required. So when Halle witnesses the ultimate violation of his wife by Schoolteacher's nephews, insanity consumes him. He learns that despite education they can cheat him, beat him, and take his wife and violate her body. Sethe had always assumed that he had left Sweet Home without her; however, when Sethe learns of this revelation, she is grief stricken and enraged because Halle saw the boys violate her and "he let those boys go on breathing." But Paul D quickly chastises her, explaining that a "man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they're inside."[46] Halle's madness forces the reader to concede what America has been trying to forget: the long-lasting psychological damage that lingered well after physical trauma had healed, especially those traumas inflicted upon their loved ones who they were powerless to protect. Deleting Halle from the movie does not assuage these particular traumas and histories; ironically, it highlights them even more. While hysteria can be read as a resignation to the realities of slavery, it can also be read as a form of resistance. Halle's hysteria further illustrates, just as Sethe does with her "Misery," that there were no "happy darkies" content with their master's paternalism.

Beloved illuminates social hierarchy, the agency of bodies, and the aesthetics of freedom. More than any other Black male in American literature, Sixo illustrates this point well. Sixo, one of the most self-actualized Black male characters in the African American literary tradition, operates within "the tradition of John," a Black folkloric idiom employed for "a new mode of black masculinity."[47] Rudolph Byrd provides a new blueprint for the modern Black man trapped by chauvinism, sexism, and homophobia. Drawn from an enslaved man of the same name, John the Conqueror or High John the Conqueror's characteristics are redemptive, transgressive, resourceful, and rooted in "mother-wit, laughter, and song; confident and durable constitution; in his youth: mannish; bodacious, defiant, willful, risky behavior. He loves the Spirit: Loves men and women (sexually and non-sexually), 'loves difference, loves creativity, song, and dance, loves himself. Irregardless [*sic*]'."[48] Likewise, Sixo remains Morrison's portrait of a free Black man without any dispossessed ideas of who he should be; he "flourishes in the 'Be' class."[49] This fact makes his problematic absence in the film all the more unfortunate. There are very few cinematic portrayals of self-actualized Black men, and Sixo's addition would have helped elevate this indifference in Hollywood.

Sixo's "indigo" skin color denotes his fertile/virile nature and his closeness to the land; furthermore, it also links him directly to Africa and signifies "untainted blood."[50] He represents the possibilities of manhood despite his enslavement. He does not rely on any White or Eurocentric vestiges of self-definition. Sixo's body is held in bondage, his mind is not. Besides Baby Suggs, he is, arguably, the freest character in the book. Schoolteacher catches Sixo with meat from a stolen shoat. Ever the trickster, Sixo attempts to reason himself out of trouble, arguing that the meat did not constitute theft because "Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work."[51] Sixo's defense is not novel, and Henry Bibb writes:

> But I did not regard it as stealing then, I do not regard it as such now. I hold that a slave has a moral right to eat drink

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> and wear all that he needs, and that it would be a sin on his part to suffer and starve in a country where there is a plenty to eat and wear within his reach. I consider that I had a just right to what I took, because it was the labor of my own hands. Should I take from a neighbor as a freeman, in a free country, I should consider myself guilty of doing wrong before God and man. But was I the slave of Wm. Gatewood to-day, or any other slaveholder, working without wages, and suffering with hunger or for clothing, I should not stop to inquire whether my master would approve of my helping myself to what I needed to eat or wear. For while the slave is regarded as property, how can he steal from his master?[52]

But Schoolteacher whipped him anyway to "show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined." The "master's tools"—reading and writing, logic and language—fail both Sixo and Halle. Lovalerie King notes that Sixo is a "highly disruptive presence" at Sweet Home primarily because he refuses to speak English.[53] I believe this linguistic resistance is a result of this exchange with schoolteacher.

Sixo's romantic commitment to Patsy, the Thirty-Mile Woman, provides a profound model that subverts popular American notions of Black intimacy. He makes several thirty-four mile round trips to see her, a feat many slave men had to make if they took a mate off their plantation. Under the heavy burdens of slavery, she holds his sanity together. He explains to Paul D that "[she] is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."[54] Again, Morrison does not privilege women over men but to juxtapose and complement each other. Whereas most cinematic depictions of Black men revolve around an imagined lascivious nature, Sixo illustrates love, romanticism, and the erotic. The inclusion of this relationship in the film would have provided a stark contrast to both Sethe and Paul D. Of course, this portrayal provides a direct counter narrative to other roles such as Gus and Mede, in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Mandigo* (1975), respectively.

During a planned escape from Sweet Home, Sixo and Paul D are captured. Still, Sixo fights, grabbing the rifle of one of his pursuers and cracking the rib of another. And it is not his retaliation that unnerves schoolteacher and his posse but Sixo's song. It is this behavior, a singing slave facing certain death, that appears to be erratic, perhaps mad. During this melee, one of the White men strikes Sixo with his rifle. Sixo's resolve is uncompromising, his will unyielding. Because of these qualities and under schoolteacher's rhetorical posturing, Sixo *must* die. Schoolteacher decides that Sixo "will never be suitable" for any future purpose. Consequently, the posse attempts to burn him alive.[55] But Sixo's indomitable spirit cannot be suppressed; he starts to laugh and sings "Seven-O! Seven-O!" Failing to understand the source of his astaticism and elation, his roasters shoot him to shut him up. His life positions him as the devil in his master's eyes but his death situates him as saint in the eyes of the reader because we know that "his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed."[56]

Paul D, Halle, and Sixo collectively illustrate a rare moment in Black cultural history where a man's masculine identity did not rely on emblems of wealth. Often masculinity is defined by one's ability to provide monetarily for a family. This is an unfortunate characteristic because for many Black men, due to a lack of education or means, money is difficult to obtain, which leads some Black men to flee/fly from their communities and families. As we see in the novel, these men have different views of what constitutes a good life and how best to live it. Paul D longs for an end to his incessant walking and home and family; Halle dreams of freedom for his family, if not for himself; and above all Sixo desires the propagation of his blood line and freedom for Patsy, the woman who gathers "the pieces of his mind." Collectively, these men, though fictional, represent a *genealogy of Black masculinity.*

Filmmaking is empire building—both maintenance and defense. It has never been mere entertainment.[57] And despite the trajectory, delivery, or even exterior facade (or interior consciousness), all film concerns itself with the racial, social and historical structures/strictures of the culture from which it comes. There are highly vested interests in whether a film portrays the shattered

psyche of a formerly enslaved person. W. E. B. Du Bois reminds us that "art is propaganda and ever must be."[58] To this end, what good is a *Beloved* if it does not deal with the context of its subjects directly. Manthia Diawara suggests that "dominant cinema," primarily produced by Whites, portrays Black characters "for the pleasure of white spectators," by making these characters "less threatening to Whites either by White domestication of Black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by stories in which Blacks are depicted playing by the rules of White society and losing."[59] Of course, ever the optimist, Winfrey frames *Beloved* as her *Schindler's List* (1993), which means that "it is a harrowing fact-based story about people who outwit and outlast war, holding out for a future that no one intended them to have."[60]

More often than not the film industry traffics in the language of commerce while obscuring the commerce of language, the results of which are condensed, uninspired, and often pedestrian renderings of life. Film, as a creative medium, is rife with possibilities and opportunities to present the unimaginable, the unattainable, and the ineffable. Thandie Newton recalls Toni Morrison's note about her character: "Beloved is the bit in you [that] you cannot betray."[61] *Beloved* is not only Sethe's pain, shame, and guilt but also America's. Perhaps, the reception of the movie and its criticisms all stem from some place within us—the collective American consciousness, Black and White—to refute and deny this history. Although Oprah's rendering of *Beloved* is not representative of all formerly enslaved persons in the United States, it nevertheless figures prominently in the *repertoire of Black resistance*, which subsumes those collaborative and associative texts—cinematic, musical, literary, and so on—that not only contest and resist the spaces/places that Black folk inhabit but also reject hegemonic ideologies of Black history and culture. While the film does not flesh out the traits and traumas of these enslaved men, it nevertheless does attempt to affect national dialogues about slavery and race. Oprah is to be commended for her attempt despite the fact the film fails to foster that dialogue. There are very few literary adaptations of African American literature.[62] Some artifacts cannot be appreciated in their own time. "If you don't

acknowledge the pain in truth, then you carry forward the pain in distortion," Oprah said. "It's no different from your own personal history and wounds. If you don't heal your personal wounds, they continue to bleed. And so we have a country of people who have continued to bleed."[63]

Notes

1. Bonnie Angelo, "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 257.
2. Oprah Winfrey, *Journey to Beloved* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), Prefatory Note.
3. Ibid., 18.
4. Richard Corliss, Georgia Harbison, and Jeffrey Ressner, "Bewitching Beloved," *Time*, October 5, 1998, 74.
5. Winfrey, *Journey to Beloved*, 18, emphasis added.
6. Marc C. Conner, "The Specter of History: Filming Memory," in *Twentieth-Century American Fiction on Screen*, edited by R. Barton Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214.
7. Here, I resist the urge to refer to the text as a feminist or "womanist" novel or film because these labels often lend themselves to reductive readings of *Beloved*.
8. Ayer (Sitter), Deborah, "The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in Beloved," in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's* Beloved, edited by Barbara H. Solomon. (New York: G. K. Hall & Company, 1998), 189.
9. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 1–34.
10. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 70.
11. Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), xi.
12. Corliss, Harbison, and Ressner, "Bewitching Beloved," 74.
13. Bernard Weinraub, "'Beloved' Tests Racial Themes at Box Office; Will This Winfrey Film Appeal to White Audiences," *New York Times*, October 13, 1998, 1.
14. "An Hour with Oprah Winfrey about the Film 'Beloved,'" *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) (October 29, 1998), http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/4621.
15. Howard Suber, *The Power of Film*, (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006), 9.
16. Daniel Fierman, "Brawl Over 'Beloved,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, October 16, 1998, 20.
17. Oprah Winfrey and Pearl Cleage, "The Courage to Dream!," *Essence*, December 1998, 80.
18. Ibid. Emphasis added.

19. Rita Dandridge emphasized the racial politics at play with white directors and black films/subject matter: "Spielberg's credentials for producing *The Color Purple* are minimal. He is not a Southerner. He has no background in the black experience, and he seems to know little about feminism." As quoted in Diawara, "Black Spectatorship," 70.
20. White authored documents, such as reference letters, were often appended to slave narratives, "attesting to the character and reliability of the slave narrator himself or herself." See William L. Andrews, "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative," accessed December 03, 2011, http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html.
21. "A Conversation with Actor Danny Glover," *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS (October 23, 1998), http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/4630.
22. "A Conversation with Director Jonathan Demme," *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS (October 26, 1998), http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/4628.
23. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 156.
24. Ibid., 101.
25. Valerie Smith, "The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary African-American Film," in *Black Popular Culture*, edited by Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 58.
26. Debbie Allen, producer of *Amistad* (1997), faced similar criticisms about white directorship. However, she circumvents the issue all together, noting that she chose Steven Spielberg to helm the project because of his work on *Schindler's List* (1993). Furthermore, Spielberg admitted that his personal interest for directing the film was his two adopted African American children. See Davis, *Slaves on Screen,* 72.
27. Mia Mask, "Beloved: The Adaptation of an American Slave Narrative," in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 276.
28. Ron David astutely observes that the text is divided into three parts, representing Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Furthermore, the book is divided into 28 chapters, which he corresponds to the lunar/menstrual cycle and Sethe's "28 days of freedom." See Ron David, *Toni Morrison Explained* (New York: Random, 2000), 130.
29. Weinraub, "'Beloved' Tests Racial Themes," 1.
30. Zia Jaffrey, "Toni Morrison: The Salon Interview," accessed March 15, 2011, http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/02/cov_si_02int.html.
31. Mervyn Rothstein, "Toni Morrison, in Her New Novel, Defends Women," *New York Times*, August 26, 1987, accessed July 06, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html.
32. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.
33. Mask, "Beloved," 280.
34. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 107–108, emphasis added.
35. Mask, "Beloved," 283. For further discussions about the ubiquitous MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) rating system, see *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006) directed by Kirby Dick.

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36. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 67.
37. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellen, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 192. For further discussions about Black male sexual abuse, see Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 86–95.
38. Jacobs, *Incidents,* 77.
39. Conner, "The Specter of History," 211.
40. Ibid., 206.
41. Please note that Paul D returns only after he learns of Beloved's second (and hopefully final) demise. Although Paul D and Sethe mistakenly believe that he ran off the baby ghost at the beginning of the novel, it is a flotilla of women who, with "the earnest syllables of agreement," remove Beloved from Sethe's house. This nuance emphasizes Morrison's artistic and perennial theme of community, not the individual.
42. Morrison, *Beloved*, 272. Paul D's ruefully beautiful quality also affects Denver at the beginning of the novel, which represents a possible "bookending" effect to emphasize his centrality to the narrative.
43. Ibid., 68.
44. Ibid., 208.
45. Ibid., 70.
46. Ibid., 69.
47. Rudolph Byrd, "The Tradition of John: A Mode of Black Masculinity," in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy Sheftall, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1.
48. Ibid., 1–2.
49. Ibid., 2.
50. Morrison, *Beloved*, 21.
51. Ibid., 190.
52. Henry Bibb, "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave" (1849), in *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume 2: 1849–1866*, edited by Yuval Taylor, 94. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999).
53. Lovalerie King, "The Disruption of Formulaic Discourse: Writing, Resistance, and Truth in Beloved," in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*. (New York: G. K. Hall & Company, 1998), 275.
54. Morrison, *Beloved*, 272–273.
55. Ibid., 126.
56. Ibid., 129.
57. Here I recast Morrison's thoughts on the politics of literary canon formation. They are particularly useful and instructive in any evaluation of "black cinema," especially a film adaptation of her book. See Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 1–34.
58. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art", *The Crisis*, October 1926, 290.

59. Diawara, "Black Spectatorship," 71.
60. Margo Jefferson, "Slavery Echoes in the Prism of a Film," *New York Times*, October 19, 1998.
61. *Beloved*, DVD, directed by Jonathan Demme (1998; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1999).
62. Ed Guerrero concurs, "We must now proceed to fill the empty space in representation with movies about the deeply complicated and brilliant black men that populate the African American narrative tradition, be that tradition expressed as signifyin', barbershop ruminations, street corner stories, or literary production. Where are the films transposing the brilliant novels of such authors as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, John Edgar Wideman, Toni Cade Bambara, Ishmael Reed?" See Ed Guerrero, "The Black Man on Our Screens and the Empty Space in Representation," *Callaloo*, 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1995): 395–400.
63. Stodghill, "Daring to go there," *Time Magazine*, (October 5, 1998): 80.

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