From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in Beloved

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From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in Beloved

The very consciousness of lynching in U.S. culture figures decisively around [black men].
—Robyn Wiegman (1995, 84)

The institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching.
—Hazel V. Carby (1987, 39)

Throughout Beloved (2004), Toni Morrison situates black men’s and women’s provocative perceptions of each other in critical tension. Paul D, the more omnipresent of the major male characters in the novel, especially bears the brunt of this mistrust for men, which the female characters express in various ways. For example, to his vehement assurance to Sethe, the novel’s protagonist, that he “never mistreated a woman in [his] life,” Sethe retorts: “That makes one [man] in the world” (80).1 The novel is rife with this gendered tension. But perhaps nothing emphasizes that conflict as clearly as the stark difference between a group of black men—the Sweet Home men—fantasizing about rape and one black woman’s valiant struggle to escape both the legacy of rape on the maternal side of her family and the literal clutches of depraved white men greedily depleting her of her breast milk. As readers of Beloved will recall, the Sweet Home men fantasize about committing rape while they desperately wait for Sethe to decide which one among them she would want as a mate. That same stark effect of gender unmindfulness is made further evident in how the five men envision their dream of raping Sethe as their “solitary gift of life” (12)—their would-be dream come true—while Sethe has

I would like to thank my colleagues in NEBSC (the New England Black Studies Collective) for their valuable insights and comments on an earlier draft of the essay.

1 Henceforth, all references to Beloved will consist only of page citations.
somehow mastered the ability to replace her complete memory of “[lynched] boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (7) with the more palatable, pastoral, and selective memory only of those “wonderful soughing [sycamore] trees” themselves (7). Both passages amount to disconcerting but mainly opposing idiosyncrasies: something like the impolitic audacity of sexual fantasies, on the one hand, and the audacity of denial on the other. Such gendered examples of willed disregard for predominantly female and male forms of victimization, respectively, suggest misunderstanding, competition, and perhaps even irreconcilable conflict between black men and women. But Morrison’s novel capitalizes on the simultaneous gender neutrality and semantic multiplicity of the tree images associated with both forms of victimage in order to eschew any assumed hierarchy of black oppression, which might privilege riveting instances of male victimization as the emblem of that oppression over instances of female victimization often viewed as less noteworthy. More to the point, my claim in this essay is that in Beloved, Morrison piggybacks on the power and currency of lynching iconography—particularly tree imagery—as a way to demonstrate continuity between violence committed against black men and women and as a way to interpolate black women’s sexually violated bodies into the publicity generated by antilynching campaigns organized as legislative interventions and even art exhibitions, which were primarily intended to protect black men (Langa 1999; Apel 2004, 83–132). Because both male and female slaves suffered violent punishment on trees, at trees, and on wooden derivatives of trees such as whipping posts, tree imagery can be viewed as one way to encapsulate “the elusiveness or instability of gender in relation to the slave as property and the erotics of terror in the racist imaginary, which range from the terrible spectacle of [Frederick Douglass’s] Aunt Hester at the whipping post to the postbellum specter of lynching,” as Saidiya Hartman so vividly puts it (Hartman 1997, 81). In other words, tree imagery signifies a male-female continuum between assaulted black slave bodies.

The critical attention that the tree imagery in Morrison’s novel has received is arguably as abundant as the images themselves. Such abundance, of course, is due in no small part to the ubertree of the novel’s main focus—that tree on Sethe’s back. Lorie Watkins Fulton (2005), however, does well to examine the oft-neglected details of other tree images in the novel. She ultimately concludes that Morrison articulates a certain level of ambivalence about their overall redemptive value. Fulton argues that trees represent, alternately, positive and negative meanings throughout the course of the novel because their growth signals the inevitable changes (good and bad) that are both brought about by and
wrought upon the natural world through time’s passing. Similarly, in her article comparing the image patterns in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Beloved*, Glenda B. Weathers also observes the dichotomous function of the trees in *Beloved* and argues, “They posit knowledge of both good and evil” (2005, 201) for black Americans seeking freedom from slavery and oppression. Like these critics, I too am interested in the possible grand narrative that a concatenation of tree references might engender. Michèle Bonnet (1997) succeeds most compellingly at such an effort by interpreting the novel’s tree imagery as Morrison’s insistence on the sanctity of all forms of life. Bonnet’s argument is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to the critical work on this novel’s arboreal concerns, but the grand narrative about trees I want to address strictly concerns the iconic resonance of tree imagery for black Americans—that is, the connotations of lynching commonly associated with trees. À la Raymond Williams, this “structure of feeling” (1977, 132) that tree iconography can evoke within black American culture serves as a flash point for a discussion of the ways in which racial violence is publicized and gendered in that culture.

The use of tree imagery to discuss sexual violence committed against women’s bodies is certainly not new, especially since the impulse to conflate female imagery into the natural landscape has long been a literary trope, spanning continents and centuries from the poetic corpus of the British Romantics to Charles W. Chesnutt’s short stories to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. But it is useful to remember that the symbolics of trees hearkens as far back as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, wherein women are turned into trees to deflect salacious attention and sexual violence away from their bodies, as in the Daphne and Apollo story. It comes as no surprise, then, that Morrison, as a student of the classics, would evoke this ancient use of tree imagery for her feminist project. But I am not interested in Morrison’s citations of her debts to her literary precursors. Rather, I am interested in how she deliberately suggests that she has somehow transgressed in borrowing from a repository of symbols that are assumed to be off-limits to her and all women because they are solely designated for the representation of black men. In other words, I am interested in understanding what this Morrisonian reassignment is doing to scramble the semiotics of particularized oppression—that is, male versus female oppression, black versus white oppression, compelling versus boring oppression. *Beloved’s* most resonant question is, “If black male and female oppression stem proverbially from the same tree, then how is it possible that black male oppression makes headlines in ways that black female oppression never has nor can?”
Elsa Barkley Brown poses an extremely relevant question in this regard: “Why is it that lynching (and the notion of it as a masculine experience) is not just remembered but is in fact central to how we understand the history of African American men and indeed the African American experience in general. But violence against women—lynching, rape, and other forms of violence—is not?” (Brown 1995, 102; see also Clinton 1994). Sandra Gunning is refreshingly forthright in proffering that lynching tells a “more compelling” story than stories concerning violence against women (1996, 6). And in conversation with a male friend over this question, Brown is quite frankly told that “Black women have no image, no symbol that they can call up so readily, so graphically in just a word as Black men do with lynching” (1995, 101–2). What Brown, Gunning, and Gunning’s friend ultimately allude to here is an iconography of African American history—a shorthand, a rebus, a picture book. Morrison helped compile just such a book, *The Black Book* (Harris 1974), while she was an editor at Random House. But the novel that Morrison would write a decade later was likely prompted not only by the news clipping of Margaret Garner’s story, which could be found in the pages of *The Black Book* itself, but also by what Morrison ultimately found wanting about *The Black Book*. Years later, upon reexamination of that ur-scarpbook of black history, Morrison could have very well concluded that the blurb entrusted with the task of introducing the section dedicated to three hundred years of black victimization might have been powerful but was nevertheless still deficient. The blurb—an excerpt from Langston Hughes’s poem “Negro”—reads as follows: “I’ve been a victim: / The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo. / They lynched me in Texas” ([1932] 1974, 55). As compelling and transatlantic as this summary of negro victimage may be, ultimately it does not suffice to represent the whole history—indeed, to represent the whole picture. *Beloved* infiltrates this bandwagon, which so readily idolizes and depends on the allure of compelling images, in order to consider what such inordinate emphasis on these images might overlook. Mindful of the importance of visual technologies to resuscitate and revise historical memory, *Beloved* strives for that whole—wholly inclusive—picture of black victimization.

2 Nell Irvin Painter’s *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (2006) most readily comes to mind as a recent effort on the part of historians to present black American history in pictorial form.

3 Margaret Garner was a fugitive slave woman who, in 1856, killed one of her children rather than allow the child to be returned to slavery. Morrison’s *Beloved* is based on this true story.
Ramify: To divide into branches

But there is an implied caveat in this desire for an African-American history picture book: it should not arrange the pictures in such a way as to privilege one aspect of that history over another. The reason, as Barbara Smith explains, is that:

The broadening of stratification scholarship to encompass race and gender, in addition to its traditional focus on class, was occasioned by the great social upheavals of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights and women’s movements. Ironically, however, these movements did not define race, class, and gender as inseparable and equally significant, but as discrete and hierarchical. Each movement tended to focus on a singular aspect of social inequality and identity, race, or gender. To this day, African-American women and, more generally, women of color, are faced with an impossible choice between loyalty to their race and to their gender. (Does one support the Million Man March? Anita Hill? The NOW?) (Smith 1997, 209–10)

Identity politics scholars in particular have had to contend with accusations that their mode of intellectual inquiry hinders coalitions and fosters a hierarchy of oppression among marginalized identity groups. One popular opponent of identity politics, Walter Benn Michaels, recommends that we foster an “indifference to difference” as a way “to imagine [and to live] a life after identity politics” (2000, 662). But this indifference is exactly the problem that many critics see with the monopolizing or distracting power of the term “lynching.” As Jacqueline Goldsby argues, the term conceals “a complex history of racial violence” (2006, 11), which includes “the rapes of black women by white men” (10–11). Such concealment can be read as indifference. It seems that the term “lynching” elicits only a fixed set of evocations, which seldom (if ever) include victimized black women or other forms of racial violence. Thus the solution to both indifference and difference, in the context of what Goldsby identifies as lynching’s linguistically imperious and exclusive “constitution and operations” (11), lies in discovering alternative semiotics in which lynching is constituted and operates as a connector (rather than a divider) between male and female experiences.

To that end, Morrison invokes the hackneyed battle of the sexes only

4 Of course, during the nineteenth century the work of Ida B. Wells had cogently established that the rape of white women was lynching’s ritualistic pretext, but in this essay I hope to build on Wells’s work by thinking seriously about the other (underexamined) forms of violence that the term “lynching” might conjure up or denote.
to reinvent it anew through a battle of iconographies and ultimately dissolves it altogether by emphasizing the reconciliatory or noncombatant nature of the icon in question. To rethink gender difference through a shared pool of iconographies, which both sexes can possibly share equally and in common, is to focus on gender amity and the possibilities for positive intergender relations within the black community. At perhaps one of the most jaw-dropping moments in the novel—that is, when Paul D admonishes Sethe’s infanticide thusly: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194)—Morrison depicts the rift that consequently forms between them in terms of tree imagery. She writes, “right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet . . . the forest was locking the distance between them, giving it shape and heft” (194). I contend that the remainder of the novel represents a journey, through this forest of supposed irreconcilable differences, which eventually leads us to the “family tree” that actually seals the connections between black men and women. The images of the alleged tree on Sethe’s back (a consequence of her reporting the sexual abuse she suffered) as well as the trees from which the black boys were lynched are interconnected and are significantly images of (gnarled) entanglement because they suggest commonalities between black men and women—the shared experience of oppression. In this novel, where a woman (Sethe’s mother) is lynched, where black men are raped by being forced to perform fellatio on their white guards, and where a Beloved-named succubus fixes a man—saps him of his manhood—Morrison is asking us to consider both the reasons for and the ways of scrambling the ossified politics and representations of gender-specific violence.⁵ In this novel, where it takes the presence of a smiling man to finally afford two long-forgotten and forsaken women some kindly attention from strangers, Morrison is asking us to consider how women and their stories become invisible and how—and via whom—those same stories can be made visible again. When, upon his arrival at Sethe’s house—referred to simply as 124 throughout the novel—Paul D monopolizes attention by provoking the ire of the baby ghost that haunts 124, fighting it with furniture, wearing it out, subduing it, and consequently getting rid of it, Sethe contends that there is something about his maleness and how men assert their

⁵ When Paul D later describes his experience in a chain gang, he relays the story of how the men in the gang were at the mercy of the “[sexual] whim of a guard, or two, or three” (127). Some of these black men resisted rape by biting the penises that the white guards force-fed them. These men were, of course, killed as a result. In addition, Pamela E. Barnett (1997) argues that “by representing a female rapist figure [the succubus Beloved] and a male rape victim, Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining domination or subjection to rape” (419).
manhood that banishes women’s histories: “[Men] encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and soon as you felt how light and lovely that was, they studied your scars and tribulations, after which they did what he had done: ran her children out and tore up the house” (26). But far from intending to monopolize attention and banish women’s stories, Paul D, as we discover at the end of the novel, “wants to put his story next to [Sethe’s]” (322). His intention—like Morrison’s—is to quash the pecking order that would rank black men’s and women’s stories and consequently pit them against each other. For Morrison, this pecking order can begin to crumble only when black men and women begin to see each other’s experiences of racial violence without denying or repressing what each has seen or allowing those visuals to destroy them.

Morrison considers the act of seeing—of witnessing—to be something of a first step in feeling sympathy for and acting on behalf of a sufferer. This philosophy is the reason Sethe is amazed to discover that, although her husband, Halle, actually saw her get violated by those white boys who steal her milk, he did absolutely nothing to save her from them. In no uncertain terms, she voices her incredulity: “He saw? He saw? He saw?” (81). However, what Halle saw “messed him up” and “broke him like a twig” (81). Sethe does not seem to realize that seeing could just as easily paralyze someone as it could catapult that person into action. The solution that Morrison proposes in an effort to avoid the deleterious costs associated with seeing is not that we close our eyes but that we try to accept and soldier through the seeing—the images. However much pain these pictures create for the person who either chooses to conjure them up or who has no choice in the matter (of seeing them), they represent a chance for historical memories to air themselves. In other words, pictures, visual technologies, and imagery constitute the release of internalized repressed histories into a public scene, a public space, an “out there” where they become accessible to any and everyone. This novel’s emphasis on images gives willed amnesia and repressed memories the cathartic opportunity to express themselves.

In Beloved, Morrison seems attuned to the ways in which symbols and images, in general, transcend categories. Symbols are immortal and public for Morrison and therefore accessible to all. Sethe is the spokesperson for this theory, which she discusses in terms of “thought pictures.”

* In language that repeats this sentiment differently, Denver thinks to herself: “It took a man, Paul D, to shout [the baby ghost] off, beat it off and take its place for himself” (123).
If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. . . . A thought picture [is when] you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. . . . Even if the whole farm [where I once lived]—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there [—] it will be there for you, waiting for you. (43–44; emphasis added)

If we apply this theory to the evocative power of lynching trees, then the thought picture of those bloody trees may reference a particular gendered and even racialized body, but to “go there”—that is, to have the courage to apply that very same picture to the history of a black woman’s abuse—is to make that bloody symbol and all of its significations hers as well. To go there is a pilgrimage to empathy. If a tree image can invoke the different yet equally horrific forms of violence committed against both black men and women, then the equalizing effect of that image suggests that the tree neutralizes the hierarchy of oppression to which Brown earlier alluded. Yet an important question remains: Is the political correctness of using a nonhuman and seemingly innocuous image to represent racial violence an advancement or a step backward in representational practices? Here I argue that Morrison’s attempt to demonstrate how black men and women can share in the historical signification assigned to the graphic symbol of a lone tree is quite commendable—certainly a creative step in the direction toward gender equality—for as Michael Walzer argues, “symbolic activity is perhaps our most important means of bringing things together” (1967, 194).

But before neutralizing the gender rivalry, Morrison borrows brazenly from a stash of historical icons ostensibly associated with, available only to, and owned by black men. By first introducing the iconographic power of the tree to symbolize the lynching of black men—“the boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world”—before she uses its power to symbolize the scar of sexual violence committed against a black woman, Morrison uncouples that popular tree symbol from its lynching milieu and from its ostensible roots in a strictly masculine experience. For Morrison, then, the tree once strictly fraternal becomes a kind of palimpsest—still legible as masculine but clearly overwritten on by a black sorority of sorts (e.g., Morrison, Sethe, and black women). It is particularly compelling to think of Sethe’s scar as this kind of gendered palimpsest,
especially since some critics, including Cheryl A. Wall (2005) and Marcus Wood (2000), imply, to a certain extent, that it recalls that famous image of the black male runaway slave known as Private Gordon baring his excessively whipped and consequently scarred and clumpy back for medical examination.7 Morrison’s deconstruction of gendered conflict in the context of black oppression does not, however, nullify gender difference in the process. What Morrison effectively does is make black male and female oppression equivalent as fungible signs by redistributing our gaze from compelling images of black oppression to the ostensibly less compelling images of black women and to the oblivion to which their oppression is often consigned.

Eyes of the beholder

From our very first introduction to the scar on Sethe’s back, we hear how conversations about it suggest that it does not belong so much to Sethe herself as it does to others, who have better viewing access to it. Because the scar is on Sethe’s back, she never actually gets to see it herself; she alone experiences the pain associated with having acquired the scar, but after that “scene of subjection” (Hartman 1997), she has neither the authority nor the ability to describe how that scar has ensconced itself on her back. Indeed, Amy Denver, the white girl whom Sethe encounters in the woods while she is fleeing Sweet Home, is the one who instigates the analogy between the scar and a tree. Amy sees how thoroughly whipped Sethe’s back is and concludes that the maze of welts and scars forms the likeness of a chokecherry tree: “It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk—it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom” (93). Sethe has no choice but to take her word for it and takes to calling the scar a tree only after Amy’s appellation. But Paul D does not see the scar as a tree whatsoever. As he lies on the bed meditating on the so-called tree Sethe had earlier introduced him to, that he had kissed and touched only moments before, it finally dawns on him that “the wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a gold miner pawing through pay dirt

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7 After recovering from a severe whipping at the hands of an overseer, Gordon ran away and enlisted in the Union Army. During his medical examination, photographers documented the scars that had developed on his back as a result of the cruel treatment he had suffered under slavery.
was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like a tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home” (25). Having had positive experiences with a tree that he had not only once befriended but also called brother, Paul D questions the sanity of the person who would have dared to dub the scar a tree of all things.\(^8\) Paul D’s refusal to see what Amy Denver saw and what Sethe had consequently begun to believe she was carrying on her back for all of these years might be a consequence of time’s passage. Sethe’s back, after all, cannot still be bleeding and red and therefore easily evocative of chokecherries. So, perhaps the scar actually no longer resembles a tree. But Paul D’s refusal is also readable as his aptitude, established earlier, for asserting his masculine presence by fighting and eradicating the obstinate “thorns in Sethe’s flesh,” as it were—the spectral one of the baby ghost and the dendritic one of the scar on her back. And although Amy Denver chooses to see nature—a tree—when she looks at Sethe’s whipped and bleeding back, she also seems to acknowledge the artificial workings of man there in saying, later, that the tree had been “planted” by someone (94). For the sign on Sethe’s back is not so much always already Sethe’s as it is a mark that has been impressed upon her by the white men who whipped her and put it there and by Amy Denver who convinces herself and Sethe that it is a tree. The tree is in the eye of the beholder, and the placement of the scar on her back renders Sethe a nonbeholder and consequently a tableau vivant, open for interpretation. As a piece of art (and yet one that evokes art’s ostensible opposite: nature), Sethe embodies a kind of diversity that expands beyond the strictly female-gendered and human world she seems to occupy.

\textit{Under cover and overexposed}

As vivid and graphic a symbol as Sethe’s chokecherry tree might be, we must not forget that the canvas on which Morrison has the tree drawn is Sethe’s back. Playing, it would seem, with the paradox of being seen and

\(^8\) I do not intend to suggest that other positive images of trees, nor humans’ relationship to trees, do not exist in the novel or in African-American history more generally. Actually, I am less concerned with placing a value judgment on trees—that is, whether they are good or bad—and more concerned with how they operate and for whom. However, for an examination of the positive work that trees do in the novel, see both Fulton’s (2005) and Bonnet’s (1997) wonderful articles on the subject, which I have already referenced in this essay.
unseen, Morrison demonstrates that she is as concerned about the implications of exposing black female bodies as she is about the implications of not exposing them at all. That the very act of evoking violence in the graphic symbol of the lynching tree is somehow capable of banishing black women from the history of racial violence in America is a power that Morrison simultaneously challenges and entertains. She wants us to see the tree image on Sethe’s back as a “filter through which we recognize and misrecognize” black women (Mitchell 2002, 175). Not only does the revelation that is Sethe’s tree invite us to acknowledge the heretofore hidden abuse of black women, but its location on Sethe’s back invites us to consider the value (in the first place) of discretion, of modesty, of hiding in general—of not making a spectacle of oneself in an age when black people were considered solely spectacle, the “serviceable corporeals” to their discreetly and conveniently disembodied white counterparts.

The logic Morrison subscribes to in giving Sethe a tree scar would seem to suggest, therefore, that the near invisibility of black women’s victimage in the broader imaginary stems from the very fact that black women have nothing to show for their allegations of mistreatment and abuse. Unlike men, they have no physical battle scars—no graphic symbol—to prove that they have indeed suffered from unspeakable crimes. For the most part, they also have no lynching photography exhibits, no pictures to offer as evidence of crimes committed against their bodies. Morrison, we might argue, sides with Brown’s friend in this matter and attempts to rectify or even overcompensate for this seeming lack in the form of an all-too-conspicuous scar—the mother of all scars, the scar to beat all battle scars. If the wounds and scars of black female trauma are supposedly unreadable because they do not surface on the discursive fleshly body, then through Sethe’s all-too-visible scar, Morrison provides us with a clear directive: Register this! See this! Read this, for there is no fine print here; this is black female trauma writ large, as large as a chokecherry tree.

The evidence of injuries suffered is not only missing or illegible on black women’s bodies as texts but also in the critical examinations of lynching as texts, the most recent and most obvious one being Dora Apel’s instructively titled *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and*
the Mob (2004). Black women do not compute in the story of lynching, it would seem. Even while critics such as Robyn Wiegman, Hazel Carby, Elsa Barkley Brown, and more recently Crystal Feimster have begun the work of investigating the role of black women as victims in the lynching narrative, none has captured the essence of that entanglement as vividly or as memorably as Toni Morrison.

But violence committed against black women is primarily not a story about lynching. Therefore, violence perpetrated against black Americans cannot be reduced to lynching precisely because violence against women largely took the form of rape. Gunning helps us understand why this form of violence is so infrequently acknowledged, writing that “because [the black woman] was [famously charged with being] the female equivalent of the black rapist, the black woman could never be raped” (1996, 10). Indeed, it is important to note that, eons before we had lynching-enabling myths about male “black beast rapists,” the reputation for depraved sexuality was one that belonged first and solely to black women. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Ideas about black men’s sexuality gained force from stereotypes about black women. Indeed Sander Gilman has argued that in Western Europe myths about black women’s concupiscence predate those about black men’s rapaciousness. In art, medicine, and literature, she served as an ‘icon for deviant sexuality in general.’ In the United States, hysteria about black men’s sexuality merged with this timeworn theme” (Hall 1993, xvii; see also Gilman 1985). To be sure, black women were not the “angels in the house” that their white counterparts were popularly viewed as being. Rather, black women were the Jezebels who seduced similarly angelic white men (Hall 1993, xxvii). Black women were viewed as the predators, not the prey.

Nineteenth-century miscegenation laws and rape laws, after all, were meant for the ostensible protection of white women, not black women. These laws were selective about the women they chose to protect, even in the face of black women’s clear vulnerability to sexual attack. As Harriet Jacobs testifies in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, the mixed-race children of slave women were seen everywhere running around the plantations. Indeed, the trauma of black female rape, if it comes out at all, manifests itself in the bodies of children: mulattos, quadroons, octoroons. To be sure, whatever the race of the rapist, the tangible outcome of the act (again if there even is an outcome to see and touch and quantify) will, more often than not, be children, who make for good consolation prizes. If they are not sold, the children are raised, invariably loved, and thus the precious ends who would seem to justify the otherwise criminal means (the rape). In Beloved, we hear tell from Nan that Sethe’s mother never
accepted nor claimed these so-called consolations: “She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. ‘She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe’” (74). These premediated rejections constitute a maverick refusal of enforced consolations—a refusal to allow rape memories to run around in the guise of small children (Wiegman 1995, 81).12

If not children, then what visible evidence of pain and suffering, lynching, and rape can black women exhibit, or display, or point to, or present in order to gain redress for the injuries inflicted upon them and with which they still continue to be afflicted? How does one begin to give shape to or illustrate one’s own traumatic memory for others? How does one begin to make memory manifest itself for objective scrutiny? “Speaking the body’s pain,” as Cynthia Davis (1993) might put it, is certainly one way to begin the process of healing and seeking redress. As several of the interviews of black female rape victims in Gerda Lerner’s Black Women in White America (1972) testify, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, verbal telling of black women’s victimage served as a kind of substitute for visual showing, especially when the visible signs of forced rape (swollen necks, bruised thighs, wounded bodies) had either subsided or altogether disappeared. But does saying it make it so? More pointedly, does a black woman’s saying it make it so? As the increasing popularity of spectacle lynching during this era demonstrated, the primacy of the visual over the verbal illustration was by this time very much culturally ingrained. Seeing the proof (of a hanging black man) made the accusation (of rape) so; it made white superiority so; it made black fear so. The ocular logic of what Wiegman succinctly calls the “specular assurance” (1995, 81) of limp, hanging bodies lynched (never to return) wins the day.13

These questions concerning visible evidence are not only part of the visual demands of a culture of spectacle lynching but also part of a larger

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12 In the novel, Baby Suggs and Ella also refuse to nurse their babies born out of rape.

13 In a lynching poem such as Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “The Haunted Oak” ([1900] 1995) one can easily argue against the presumed incapacity of the racial threat’s return by thinking about how that threat can actually be transferred from its corporeal manifestation as dead corpse to a supernatural state of spectral haunting (a speaking, persistent, and ever-present ghost).
contemporary national fascination with visual culture, which began to flourish in academia when *Beloved* was written and which continues to grow today. A year before the novel’s publication in 1987, W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) was published, and in the next two years, Hal Foster’s *Vision and Visuality*, Griselda Pollock’s *Vision and Difference*, Laura Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures*, and David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* all followed suit in an academic trend that seemed to tap into the recesses of our own obsessions with looking and seeing, which (as Guy Debord argues) constitutes a “society of the spectacle” (1994, 15).14 Morrison was, herself, quite aware of the significance of the visual to memory, and she saw her novel as a tangible, textual, and imagistic testimony to the memory of the “sixty million and more,” according to the novel’s dedication page, who died under the institution of slavery. But for Morrison, the novel itself is too flimsy, ultimately still wanting, simply insufficient to the task of memorializing those sixty million and more. As she explains, the slave dead are deserving of something literally and symbolically monumental: “There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower. There is no small bench by the road” (Morrison 1989, 4–5). In typical Morrisonian fashion, Morrison’s proposal for a slave memorial is simultaneously modest (a wreath, a small bench) and excessive (a 300-foot tower). But whether she is thinking small or big, when she envisions how slavery should be remembered, she wants sites and she wants sights.15 Even when Sethe speaks of the painful memory of sexual abuse she suffered at Sweet Home, she speaks not of a mental and therefore interior reminiscence but of an actual visual reminder of that past: Sethe recalls the “picture of the men coming to nurse her,” not the memory of them coming to nurse her (6; emphasis added). If memories come in pictures and if seeing is believing, then Morrison capitalizes on the cultural value of these premises to provide us with an iconography of the abuses suffered under black slavery—an iconography not soon to be forgotten.

14 Debord (1994) argues that we are forever proclaiming like automatons that “everything that appears is good [enough to constitute reliable evidence]; [and] whatever is good will appear” (15).

15 In July 2008, the first Morrisonian bench by the road—an actual bench—was placed at a site on Sullivan’s Island. According to its Web site, the Toni Morrison Society has set a goal to place ten steel benches at unmarked sites that have significance in African American history or in Morrison’s novels. For more information, see Morrison (1989).
Lest we conclude that Sethe’s larger-than-life scar suggests that Morrison has somehow obediently surrendered to the impetuous dictates of a visual culture peopled by Doubting Thomases wanting to see to believe, we should note that she has already built into the image on Sethe’s back an ambivalence about the visual. This visual aid to Morrison’s endgame of trying to render unto black women a reliable and powerful graphic symbol of historical oppression is not simply a visual aid for the sake of visual aids; it is also a visual aid intended to critique the very limits of ocular logics and to question any loyalties we might have to reading only one meaning into an image. As we have already seen, by holding Sethe’s back captive to a heterogeneous audience that reads and interprets the scar in many different ways, Morrison complicates a received understanding of the prima facie value of seeing.

By placing the tree on Sethe’s back, Morrison also invites us to consider the relational aspect of violence against blacks. For while violence perpetrated against black men occurred mostly outdoors to display these bodies as spectacles for white entertainment and black instruction, violence against black women mostly occurred in less prominent spaces—private places, indoors, in domestic spaces. For example, in *Within Our Gates* (1920)—Oscar Micheaux’s black rebuttal to *Birth of a Nation*—Micheaux formulates a similarly gendered and spatial response to the famous scene in which a lecherous black man, Gus, is lynched for having so ardently pursued a white woman, Flora, that she leaps off a cliff to her death. Cutting back and forth between an outdoor scene of the lynching of a black man, his son, and his wife and an indoor scene of an imminent rape in which a lecherous white man sneaks inside a house and just as hotly pursues the black woman therein, Micheaux fleshes out the stereotypical lynching narrative involving the usual triumvirate—black men, white women, and the mob; he inserts the black woman into that horrifying yet visually memorable instance of black oppression via a domestic outdoor scene of lynching, involving an entire black family, and via a spatially domestic indoor scene, implicitly related to the lynching narrative, in which a black woman becomes the victim of attempted rape.16

16 It is interesting, especially in the context of an essay on *Beloved*, to note that what prevents the man from proceeding with the rape is a scar he notices on the black woman’s chest—an identifying mark of the black child he had fathered illegitimately. The black woman is, in fact, his daughter. You may recall that after Sethe sees the scar under Beloved’s chin—indicating that Beloved must surely be her daughter, because this scar must surely be a consequence of the handsaw that she had used to murder Beloved—Sethe begins to exclude Denver from their family activities. Beloved’s and Sethe’s scars test the limits of and expand on narratives that view visual evidence written on the body as a resolution, a silver bullet,
This spatial division of venues of violence, along gendered lines and discourses of visibility, may help to explain why violence committed against black men is ostensibly more memorable than violence against black women. More often than not, it would seem that Lady Macbeth’s imperative, “unsex me here,” might be the only open sesame that black women have to access modes of cultural visibility, of being acknowledged, of being seen, and of being heard. For Hortense Spillers, it is the very moment when female flesh is aired for public display that such unsexing occurs:

The African female subject . . . is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the “ overseer” . . . has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh [is a scene] of female flesh “ungendered.” (Spillers 1987, 68)

Jacqueline Jones Royster adds to Spillers’s argument by reminding us about the gendered distinctions between public life and private life, which many people strictly adhered to during the turn of the twentieth century. As she writes, “In the 1890s women who discussed social and political issues (rather than concerns of the home) in public arenas were pioneers in territory that was fundamentally gender-restricted—that is, for males only” (1997, 18–19). Finally, in her Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics and the Great Migration (1996), Elizabeth Clark-Lewis observes how “southern white society considered female slave agricultural workers debased, degraded, and masculinized because they had entered a traditionally male labor environment. This view resulted in the social judgment that women who worked in the fields were unworthy of preferential treatment, or of the title ‘lady’” (11). In treading on so-called male territory, these crossover women seek the level of attention usually reserved for men. But what do these ungendered women actually look like? And how effective or convincing a plea for sympathy can such women make? Spillers’s passage helps to revive images that are already extant in

or an expedient deus ex machina. Morrison is thus interested in the politics of this desire for physical evidence, especially the ways in which it reinscribes the body as the guarantor of the real. Sethe’s pain and trauma do not begin or end at the scar.
history books, and perhaps even suppressed somewhere in our own memory banks, but that are not as entrenched in the memory as those of black men lynched, hanging from those selfsame tree limbs. One cannot help but recall that famous image in John Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796) illustrated by William Blake. The image depicts a nearly naked slave woman tied by her wrists to a tree as she is about to be whipped (fig. 1). This image surely provides a salient example of female flesh overexposed and consequently ungendered. Yet I would argue that however accurate a depiction of female slave life this engraving may be at first glance, it is not (in the end) a realist representation and therefore not as effective a mnemonic in searing female-specific abuse into the visual unconscious.\(^{17}\) To ungender Sethe by popping her flesh open, by seeming to evoke Private Gordon through the scar on her back, or by intentionally preceding any talk of her tree with the more familiar arboreal discourse of the boys’ lynching trees in the novel, is to stow her away on an already reliable advertising campaign known for its ability to garner a sympathetic audience.

The discourse and imagery of lynching, which focus so much on the black male body and its allegedly offending and often castrated genitalia, demonstrate compellingly that spectacle lynching is about a particular body. Whites ask other whites to see the lynched victim in order that they may believe that the mythologized black beast rapist has been exterminated. Whites ask blacks to look at the lynched victim in order to warn them against committing the alleged crime(s) for which the victim was lynched. Finally, blacks ask blacks, especially black boys, to look at the lynched victim in order to caution them from doing anything to provoke such (white) wrath. Such urgent exhortations to see how black people both ought and ought not to suffer the hatred of racism—when those representing black people are predominantly black men—necessarily obstruct one’s ability to see the whole picture or spectrum of the history of lynching violence. Such exhortations may ultimately skew our sense of

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\(^{17}\) According to Wood’s reading of this illustration, “The scene lacks the monumental clarity of the descriptions of male torture—there is a fanciful element which blurs the violence. The tiny twig to which the woman is tied, the balletic delicacy of her posture . . . and the fact that her back, the site of violence, is completely hidden from the viewer, are elements which camouflage the . . . atrocity. In the end it is the confusion of suffering with desirability which problematises the image. Staring front on at an almost naked and physically magnificent young woman, who is pushed right up against the viewer, it is hard not to become compromised. Blake seems to be inviting us to enjoy the sexual frisson elicited by such suffering beauty. . . . Blake’s image teeters on the verge of pornography in order to confront us with our own corruptibility” (Wood 2000, 236–37).
Figure 1  William Blake, “Whipping of a Samboe Girl” (copper engraving, 1796).
racism, reducing it to only those things we can see. Does lynching define violence as black male suspect and black male victim, thus compressing the plenitude of violence in America into one body? Assuming that sympathy over the historical plight of black Americans is an exhaustible resource, is it possible for black men to hold a monopoly over sympathy because history has marketed their pain so spectacularly? What, if anything, have black women learned from this marketing technique that might help them direct some of that sympathy their way?

I do not wish to take away from the gravity of lynching violence when I use the language of public relations and advertising firms to describe the impact, on viewers, of seeing these lynched bodies. Neither do I wish to pit black men against black women in some perversely morbid competition over who has suffered the most in the history of American racial violence. Rather, my intention is to encourage us to consider the serious effects of being bombarded by these images, of consequently associating them with one particular gender. If, to borrow from Marlon B. Ross, “race castration and race rape . . . are intrinsically interconnected phenomena” (2002, 305), then I want to understand how black writers, wanting to acknowledge, preserve, and honor that interconnection, attempt to share in the good publicity that castration’s compellingly ocular proof of racial violence can offer to the victimized male. To discuss lynching violence in terms of marketing techniques is to perceive the lynching ritual as a relentless campaign launched to achieve specific goals. The antilynching movement, which necessarily had opposing goals, was likewise spoken of in terms of a campaign. In its publication, Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1913, the NAACP boldly admitted that a publicity blitz was indeed the organization’s chosen modus operandi: “The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, within the limits of its financial resources, has been carrying on an educational and publicity campaign in the public press through its own pamphlet publications and the columns of The Crisis, and through public meetings, to bring home to the American people their responsibility for the persistence of this monstrous blot upon America’s honor” (NAACP [1919] 1969, 5). From vivid retellings of unabating incidents of lynchings to the hard evidence of statistics, the NAACP brought home its message with a discernible sense of urgency. In one appendix to the publication, a table of figures reveals that from 1889 to 1918, a total of 2,522 black people were lynched—50 of whom were black women—while the remaining 2,472 were black men. The proof that lynchings targeted blacks, and particularly black men, was in the numbers. The NAACP was adamant about drawing attention to these numbers, which inevitably exposed the
preponderance of male lynching victims. To further their respective causes, both lynching and antilynching campaigns relied on visual aids to persuade their audiences. The lynching campaigns had the actual hanging bodies, photographs, and postcards. The antilynching campaigns, meanwhile, had “An Art Commentary on Lynching” and “The Struggle for Negro Rights,” art exhibitions organized in 1935 by NAACP executive secretary Walter White and Communist-affiliated organizations, respectively (Park 1993; Vendryes 1997; Apel 2004, chap. 3). Only a scant few of the various forms of artwork in the exhibits depicted black women. Such an elision asks that spectators not only look at the black male bodies on display but that they also look for the missing black women who—although unaccounted for in artistic representation—suffered similar fates in reality. The absent presence of black women begs to be read as the buried subtext of black female sexual abuse within the lynching narrative. *Beloved* helps us to think through some of the ways in which the visual economy of spectacle lynchings can be exploited to work in the service of outing the sexual abuse of black women. The novel ultimately suggests that our epistemology of American racial violence, albeit lacking precisely because of our weakness for the spectacular, may be salvaged by way of the spectacular—the spectacular scar.

**Correlative thinking**

But why should a tree be the symbol to indicate that the attention paid to violence against black women can be matched, pari passu, by the attention paid to violence against black men? The answer, of course, lies in the fact that from the 1880s to the late 1930s, “lynching [and its typical metonymic shorthand in tree imagery was] the most glaring, inescapable, and enduring symbol of racist oppression in the United States” (Apel 2004, 221). To partake in that symbol is to accept and benefit from the visibility that is an inevitable consequence of being in the lynching/anti-lynching limelight.

That lynching violence plays any part in the novel in the first place is a curious and therefore noteworthy matter, since *Beloved* takes place between 1860 and 1873, a time during which the frequency of lynching was nowhere near the level it reached during the 1880s and 1890s. But lynching was indeed a fact of life for slaves as well. The lynched boys hanging from the sycamore trees in Morrison’s novel constitute at least one literary instance of this historical phenomenon. And the novel’s reference to “the eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky” (212) corresponds to historical records indicating that lynching had indeed
become a fact of black life as early as the late 1860s. Historian Hall (1993) maintains that the threat of lynching necessarily loomed large during slavery for disciplinary reasons: “In the antebellum South, lynch law helped suppress both white dissidence and slave rebellion. The planter’s self-interest and the ideology of paternalism gave a measure of protection to the slaves, and before the Civil War many victims of vigilante violence were white. Nevertheless, the cycle of slave-insurrection panics, in which vigilante committees conducted mock trials, extracted confessions by torture, and staged public executions, set a bloody precedent for racial lynchings” (131). But, in the novel, although lynching is certainly alluded to, it is not so overwhelming a symbol of oppression as is Sethe’s scar. Thus, when talk about the sycamore trees of lynching violence is overtaken by a focus on the chokecherry tree of sexual violence, we are encouraged to ask if the transition from one tree to another is meant to be seamless or jarring.

Morrison’s experiment in giving black women’s bodies publicity historically reserved for black men is bound up with what I would like to call her correlative thinking. For Morrison, different subjects should not be thought of disparately but mutually. The plight of black women should not be in competition for attention with the plight of black men, nor should it be relegated to the lower frequencies. Morrison begins to show us how to avoid this impulse to classify, contrast, and rank by first exhorting us to consider the possible implications of mistaking a man-made scar for a natural object.

From scenes of men coupling with young cows, to jungles planted in black people, to a hawklike mother snatching up her children in order to protect them, to images of trees embossed on black flesh, in Beloved Morrison entreats us to think not like the character Schoolteacher, who seems overly concerned that one’s “human characteristics [be cataloged] on the left; [and the] animal ones on the right” (228), but to consider what black intimacy with the natural environment might reveal about the history of violence against blacks in America. Because if, as Gerda Lerner (1972) argues, “the sexual oppression of black women . . . is . . . an instrument in the oppression of the entire race” (172), then the branches of Sethe’s chokecherry tree represent an arc between black women and black men. We are encouraged to see the chokecherry tree simultaneously

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18 For a historical reference to lynchings in Kentucky during this time period, see Wright (1990).
19 This is a term I borrow from Jacqueline Goldsby (2006, 11), who borrows it from Ralph Ellison.
as a woman’s rape tree and as a man’s lynching tree. It may be Sethe’s for being on her own back, but the visual and aural allusions of the word chokecherry also evoke the strangled necks on nooses of black men lynched.\(^{20}\) For, as Lerner further contends, “When black men are prevented from defending their women and their children, they are symbolically castrated and assaulted in their essential dignity. Black women, in such a situation, are doubly instrumentalized—as objects of forcible rape and as instruments in the degradation of their men” (1972, 172–73). Sethe’s tree ramifies to incorporate black men and black women. It is neither hers nor a conglomerate “his” but all of ours precisely because violence against black men and women is a shared history. It is neither a possessive hers nor his because trees as natural objects belong to an ecological collective of all species, organisms, races, and genders. To think of chokecherry/Sethe as a kind of missing link in the American landscape (being part human and part tree as she seems to be) is to imagine the landscape as having a genealogy of its own, and it is also to extend the boundaries of the human body into the realm of a broader ecosystem of living things that require our tending to, our loving, and our claiming.

Like marigolds, like strange fruits, and like trees, objects of the natural world are linked to human beings, and as a result they are fully equipped and qualified to stand in for the human body precisely because they also live and breathe and, therefore, suffer similar fates as human beings. As Bonnet convincingly argues, Morrison intentionally analogizes a sawyer’s “sin of cutting trees for a living” with Sethe’s use of a saw to cut Beloved’s throat (Bonnet 1997, 45). The life in both organisms—the tree and the child—encourages us to see each as an extension and complement of the other. For even while the narrator insists that the story of Sethe and Beloved is not a story to pass on, not a story to share, she appears to suggest that what finally passes on this story (what finally breathes life back into this story) is the “wind in the eaves” seeming to whisper Beloved’s name (327). The trace of memory blows in the wind and is carried by the wind. The telling, it appears, is indeed up to weather, as Morrison laments. But rather than leaving the distribution of this historical memory and its weight to the caprices of the “wind in the eaves” and to “just

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\(^{20}\) Because of all the references to how Sethe is sexually violated by the white men at Sweet Home, I suggest that the “cherry” suffix at the end of the word could very well allude to the vernacular use of the word “cherry”—that is, as symbolic of a woman’s virginity. Thus, to think of chokecherry as a compound word that incorporates allusions to violence against black men and black women, respectively, is to understand the important work Morrison is doing in the service of paying equal attention to those differently gendered (yet equally pained) bodies.
weather,” the novel invites us to create and sustain what Sethe calls “thought pictures” and what Pierre Nora calls a *milieux de mémoire*, a real living environment of memory (1989, 7)—one that is necessarily in conjunction with these sights of memory, these corporeal sites of memory that visualize, locate, and indeed root a memory, which is always in danger of dying, evaporating, or disappearing without a trace.

This holistic approach to viewing the corporeal frame within the context of a larger ecosystem extends the sites upon which black abjection can manifest itself; for if black abjection and violence against blacks can manifest themselves on the American geographical landscape as thought pictures—sites of mourning, memory, and cultural retrieval—then the weight and responsibility of that historical baggage and trauma need not be carried only and unfairly by the singular frame of an individual body or a racial collective (blacks); it must be carried by the entire country. Not only does the image of the tree as a symbol for violence (and reconciliation) hark back to black American history and classical literature, it also points to or anticipates the dialectic of landscape and society, which has underwritten much of Morrison’s corpus. So as a telling coda to this essay, I end with words borrowed from the Morrison novel that followed *Beloved*—that is, *Jazz* (1992). Because *Beloved* is the first and *Jazz* is the second novel in Morrison’s historical trilogy, I would like to see these words as logical follow-ups to Morrison’s intentions in *Beloved*. In this very early scene in *Jazz*, the female protagonist, Violet, happens upon the man destined to be her future husband, Joe Trace, and he is sleeping in a tree. The following dialogue ensues:

“*You sleep in trees?*”
“*If I find me a good one.*”
“*Nobody sleeps in trees.*”
“I sleep in them.”
“*Sounds softheaded to me. Could be snakes up there.*”
“*Snakes around here crawl the ground at night. Now who’s softheaded?*”

. . .
“*What you doing out here, then, Mr. High and Mighty, sleeping in trees like a bat?*”
“*You don’t have one nice word for a hurt man?*”
“*Yeah: find somebody else’s tree.*”
“*You act like you owned it.*”
“*You act like you do.*”
“Say we share it.” (3–4)
And eventually, in the course of the novel, the tree does indeed become theirs—exactly as Morrison would have it.

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