

## **“They Came In My Yard”: Movement, Boundaries, and Privilege in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved***

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From the boundaries of the slavery plantation to the black codes and Jim Crow to redlining in Northern cities to the fences and walls of the modern prison, white supremacy repeatedly summons up boundaries around black individuals to restrict their movements. Simultaneously, it repeatedly violates these very boundaries when put into place by black individuals through such mechanisms in the past as the Fugitive Slave Act and currently through over-policing. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* articulates a politics of movement which engages with the complexities of freedom as it relates to bodies, gender, and race. Contained within the boundaries of the text are discussions of boundaries themselves, and the ways in which an individual’s ability to either move across boundaries or to construct one’s own boundaries and remain within them becomes intimately tied to questions of privilege, both racialized and gendered. This politics of motion and boundaries appears continually through the characterization and actions of multiple voices within the text, such as Paul D, Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, Mr. Garner, and the schoolteacher. Each of these characters provide a different look into the ways in which power, privilege, and bodies construct the ways that one moves in society, both physically and metaphorically. By examining the links between motion, boundaries, and power, *Beloved* asserts ways in which movement is inherently gendered, racialized, and political. Furthermore, it calls upon the individual reader to engage in their own politics of motion and space. America simultaneously refuses to move on from racism while also refusing to acknowledge its existence, constantly fleeing what it means that the nation founded itself upon the enslavement of black individuals. In an interview, Toni Morrison stated that “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... There's no small bench by the road... And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to" (qtd. in McKay 3). *Beloved's* very story serves to become that text, the space where people can move to and then cease movement in order to memorialize and think (or not think) about the nation's racialized past. Once the reader has sat upon *Beloved's* bench, it offers up an intricate reading of the racialized and gendered meanings of being able to both move freely and to choose not to move, to be able to construct boundaries and to lower boundaries, and the horrifying consequences of when a marginalized group has these abilities infringed upon by the empowered, oppressive structure of white supremacy.

The ties between masculinity, movement, and freedom seem obvious – after all, what is masculinity but freedom and what is freedom but the ability to go where one pleases – but racial hierarchy particularly problematizes this seemingly simple equation. In her text, "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," Sherley Anne Williams describes how nineteenth century literature written by Black men constructs black masculinity through a "pattern of self-restraint, of physical self-control as an avenue to moral superiority and intellectual equality vis-à-vis white society" (518-19). This structuring of Black manhood focuses far more on an internal sense of self, one which remains comparative to white masculinity in-so-much as the Black male self reveals itself as being stronger than the white self. Toni Morrison's Paul D follows this general pattern, but he adds an element of movement to it; for Paul D, physical self-control includes not only the moral decision of choosing when and when not to choose to engage in violent struggle, but also in the ability to simply move freely. As a former slave and convict, both roles which position an individual as fixed to a particular space, this logic of movement makes perfect sense, and this logic is apparent when, early in the text, Paul D thinks that if a Black man "got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up" (11). At

this point, Paul D's politics of motion are quite simple: a Black man must enact movement or he risks becoming immobile through the machinations of white supremacy. However, as the text continues, this position of Black masculinity with constant motion and oppression with being fixed to a particular point becomes troubled through Paul D's decision to remain at the house known as 124, a decision which Beloved (the ghost of Sethe's dead baby which haunts the home) later overrules. Despite Paul D's desire to stay with Sethe and make a life with her, Beloved was "mov[ing] him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because he looked like he was moving himself" (134). He specifically notes that this movement away from Sethe have nothing to do with his own desires, stating that it had "nothing to do with the woman, whom he loved a little bit more every day" but instead "he realized the moving was involuntary. He wasn't being nervous; he was being prevented" (136). Beloved forces Paul D to move despite his own desires, arguably due to the way he disrupts the order Beloved desires to maintain. In "'Prophesying Bodies': Calling for a Politics of Collectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," April Lidinsky claims that it is "Paul D's growing ability to move both others and himself to new somatic knowledges and connections [that become] such a threat to Beloved's own connection to Sethe that Beloved 'moves' Paul D right back" out of 124 and the progress he's made (206). Much like slavery and white supremacist structures themselves, the memories of those structures also enact a certain way of structuring living, forcing Black individuals to act in certain ways, such as keeping them fixed to a single location or splitting them up from their families, whether they want to or not. Paul D's politics of motion evolve at this point as he recognizes that white supremacy threatens not only to fix individuals to a point, but also preventing them from staying where they desire.

Positioned directly against Paul D and both his inability to construct boundaries of belonging and his attempt to define his ability to move as a form of freedom are the white slave owners of Sweet Home, both Garner and schoolteacher. White men, bearing the privilege

provided by both patriarchy and white supremacy, do not need to struggle to remain in a single place, constructing a home. Nor do they require license to move freely amongst society, or even to cross the boundaries of other individuals. Instead, Garner and schoolteacher represent the privileged powers to build and transgress boundaries with ease. While Paul D is pondering upon what difference actually existed between the two white owners of Sweet Home, he considers how “Garner called and announced them men—but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Has he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?” (260). Paul D openly recognizes that Garner constructed the boundaries of Sweet Home, and it was only within those boundaries where Paul D and the other Sweet Home men were recognized as men. As the text puts it earlier, “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race” (148). Garner, asserting his authority as a white male slave owner, discursively constructs barriers around his plantation, and within those boundaries Paul D and the other slaves are considered men. He does so as a means of exerting his power as an upper-class white man who the text describes as acting “like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with” (164). Garner, positioning himself as a child-like god figure, plays with the lives of his slaves, creating them solely for his own pleasure. Nowhere is this better seen than when, early on, the text describes a typical encounter between Garner and another slave owner where he insults another man and “came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men” (12-13). The discursive boundaries surrounding Sweet Home and labelling the black men within as men are not intended to bolster the manhood of Paul D and the other Sweet Home men, but their true purpose is to serve the white man who possesses the power and privilege to make those boundaries in the first place. White men do not struggle to create boundaries and spaces for themselves to exist within then, but instead do so with such ease that they can also set and create those boundaries for

others.

Schoolteacher, on the other hand, represents the ways in which American society licenses white masculinity to transcend the boundaries perilously erected by the disprivileged. Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in the sequence where schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher, and a sheriff all approach 124 to try and bring back Sethe and her children. Historically speaking, this movement of boundaries and control mechanisms of slavery from the South into the North represents the ways in which the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 provided a privilege of movement which inherently built itself on the disprivileging of black individuals. The act, immediately controversial due to its harsh effects upon individuals who thought they had escaped to freedom by crossing the boundary of the Mason-Dixon Line, sparked an angry response from abolitionists. Appealing to Massachusetts' legislators, abolitionist Lydia Maria Francis Child, wrote in "The duty of disobedience to the Fugitive slave act : an appeal to the legislators of Massachusetts" about how the state's Personal Liberty Bill, which required a trial before sending slaves back to the South, was only a half-useful measure that effectively told slave owners to "*prove* that the man is property, according to *your* laws, and I will drive him into your cattle pen with sword and bayonet" (4, emphasis original). By allowing slave hunters to cross the Mason-Dixon Line legally, the Fugitive Slave Act effectively opened up more movement for white slave owners while destroying the boundaries which fugitive slaves previously relied upon for their freedom. It is Baby Suggs, in a discussion with another former slave and fixture in the community, Stamp Paid, who best expresses the effects of this white masculine mobility upon the psyche and freedom of black former slaves. While arguing about if and why Baby Suggs had given up on living, Stamp Paid asks her "You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?" and Baby Suggs simply replies "I'm saying they came in my yard" (211). The white slave owner crossed the carefully constructed boundary of Baby Suggs' home, of 124's yard, thus rendering those boundaries discursively empty and

worthless. Naomi Mandel describes the ways in which this violation lead to Sethe's killing of her daughter, stating that the family's fence "is a border which separates outside from inside, and while it can be crossed... it operates as a line distinguishing '124' from 'not-124,'" and the white men's trespasses are the beginning of a series of boundary disruptions that culminate in Sethe's murder of her baby (596). This slave owner could not cross onto another white man's property and take a person as his own; the boundaries of white men remain sacred, but those of a black woman remain viable for violation. Furthermore, he did so with social sanction; along with him came "one slave catcher and a sheriff" (174). The slave catcher, empowered by the Fugitive Slave Act and schoolteacher's hiring, and the sheriff, empowered by his position as the enactor of laws, reveal precisely how permissible such actions are in a capitalist patriarchal white supremacy. The very rules of the system allow these men to act in this way, providing them with legal "roads" which allow them to cross any borders placed by the barely legally recognized black Americans.

While the depiction of black masculinity within the novel focuses upon the ability to move or not to move, the depictions of black femininity involve the ability to construct and maintain boundaries surrounding the domestic space and the individual body. Taking on this analysis risks reifying particular gendered assumptions about masculinity and femininity's ties to the idea of public and private spheres, but the ways in which society racializes gender ideals so that people of color cannot perform their socially prescribed gender roles "correctly" makes taking this risk important in terms of fully understanding gender and racial constructions. Attempting to construct a safe, domestic space to rebuild her family within is amongst the first things Baby Suggs take up once she has gained her freedom. Offered a house by the Bodwin family, friends of her former slave master, Baby Suggs describes how her family is "scattered... but maybe not for long" (169). The text then offers a long list of potential relatives she desires to try and find, hoping to reestablish their familial bonds within the relative safety of her newly acquired home.

While she never quite finds those individuals, she does attempt to recreate a happy family home with the escaped Sethe and her grandchildren, only for her to eventually feel the “dark and coming thing” of schoolteacher approaching her carefully constructed familial yard (173). Despite all her attempts, Baby Suggs’ could not promise safety to her family members whose freedom and personhood was not recognized by the white power structures of slavery and property law. The optimistic narrative of freedom through escape to the North appears throughout previous slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs’ works, imagined the North as a space opposed to the South and offering escaped slaves a space to rebuild their lives. While these texts do pay homage to the Fugitive Slave Act and the absolute terror that it instilled within escaped individuals who previously presumed themselves to be “free,” they maintain a level of optimism about the North’s relative safety. *Beloved* explodes this conceptualization of the Mason-Dixon Line as a boundary between the North and South, revealing the horrific consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act upon black individuals.

Schoolteacher, his nephews, and the actions that they perpetrated on Sweet Home further penetrated the boundaries of Sethe and the others, not only by restricting movements and feeling entitled to move into particular spaces but also through the sexual violation of the feminine body. Throughout *Beloved*, Sethe recalls her rape at the hands of schoolteacher’s nephews where the two boys held her down and assaulted her breasts. In her psychoanalytic work on fathers and boundaries in *Beloved*, Fowler claims that this scene “illustrates how a white racist, phallogocentric culture attempts to reconfigure a scene of witnessed parental lovemaking as an image of black devaluation” (18). While Fowler goes on to try and explain how this sequence supposedly matches the Freudian conceptualization of the primal scene in which a child sees their parents having sex despite numerous differences, what remains useful is the way she positions this text as a reconfiguration invoked by white supremacist patriarchy to retool an action into a form of

degradation. The disruption and violation of sexual boundaries becomes yet another mean by which whiteness subjugates blackness by moving into and across boundaries without consent, thus rendering them discursively weak and porous. This violation of sexual boundaries, however, also crucially disrupts Sethe's identity as a mother. Repeatedly through the text she states that the boys "took [her] milk" with one of the first instances appearing when she tells Paul D for the first time what they did and how they beat her afterwards. Paul D cannot comprehend schoolteacher and the nephews beating a pregnant woman but, based on her repetition and exclamation, the greater crime was that they "took [her] milk!" (20). The nephews' act of rape crosses not only a sexual boundary, but it also disrupts the central identity Sethe takes up of being a mother to her children. The two boys symbolically replace her children with themselves, stealing the product of her motherhood, meant for her own children. By crossing the boundary of which individuals possess the right to drink a mother's milk, they also cross the boundaries which locate Sethe's biological children as her children, disrupting the boundaries that position an individual as a person's child. These child / not-child boundaries and positions mutually configure the boundaries of Sethe's own location as a black mother, and thus this act of mammary rape works to utterly destroy Sethe's own selfhood. Whiteness and those who embody it, with complete disregard for the boundaries and personhood of those who embody blackness, empowers itself to move freely across any boundary it pleases, laying waste to those across the borders.

The early sexual interaction between Paul D and Sethe in the kitchen, however, works to re-establish those boundaries through the seemingly contradictory act of having said boundaries traversed. In her work, "When Selves Have Sex", Talia Bettcher discusses an interactional account of intimacy in which it "does not merely involve increased sensory access. Rather, it requires interpersonal boundaries traversed in cases of mutuality and transgressed in cases of abuse" (612). As she then goes on to state, it "is not merely sensory access to a body part, but to an



intimate (private) body part that is part of a larger ordering of boundaries” which is arousing (613). In other words, intimacy is constructed through the movement across and between the interpersonal boundaries which structure the self and the Other, the intimate and the public. In the case of Sethe’s rape by schoolteacher and his nephews, this movement and transgression of boundaries occurred as a violation; the acts inherently disrespected her boundaries and, thus, rendered them discursively weak and porous. Paul D’s act of intimacy with her, however, traversed those boundaries in a way which respected them and, thus, rendered them valid and recognized. *Beloved* describes Paul D as a man who women invited across their personal boundaries, stating that he “had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner” (20). The text never quite describes what it is about Paul D’s presence and manner which leads to women letting him cross into their personal lives, but the text makes it known that they invite him in, that it is a pleasure for them. When he then takes Sethe’s breasts in his hands, she felt pleasure at knowing “that the responsibility for her breasts, at last was in somebody else’s hands” and wishes that she could spend as much time as possible in that space where she was “relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread” (21). The mutuality of this intimate interaction - again focused on Sethe’s breasts, the same intimate, private body parts as were the site of her previous violation – provides both individuals with pleasure, rendering them interpersonally equal; Paul D traverses Sethe’s boundaries consensually, thus marking those boundaries as worthy of respect, while simultaneously Sethe feels safe and capable of letting someone into her intimate space and sharing her weight with them. The movement across and between boundaries, then, does not necessarily mark those boundaries as porous but can, instead, recognize their existence and importance. In this moment, Paul D and Sethe both mark themselves as subjects with agency. Paul D enacts the masculine practice of motion while Sethe

constructs a respected sphere of intimacy.

Sethe further reestablishes the boundaries around her sphere of being, specifically the domestic space, in the final section of the novel where she attacks Mr. Bodwin as he attempts to enter her yard and take Denver to work for him. With the black female community arriving to banish the ghost of Beloved from the house, so too comes another white man into the yard of 124. However, this time Sethe does not “[recognize] a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children” (187). During this original white encroachment upon her domestic space in an attempt to take her children, Sethe’s reaction was to prevent his victory through the destruction of what lay within the boundaries of her life. She would not allow her children to undergo the horrors of slavery, even though “she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own,” and she chooses that death would be better than letting whites dirty “her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing” (296). Sethe’s original reaction is not to repulse the white invader forcing itself across the boundaries she’s constructed, but to destroy what the boundaries are meant to protect. The act effectively agrees with the white supremacist construction of privilege that white individuals can freely broach boundaries without resistance, which further tears apart her own boundaries. The second time a white man approaches 124 to take a child, however, she acts differently. As the narrator puts it later on when Paul D tries to understand what happened “whiteman came to take Denver to work and Sethe cut him. Baby ghost came back evil and sent Sethe out to get the man who kept her from hanging” (315). She sees yet another white man with “his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose” and “if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand” as she goes to try and attack Mr. Bodwin (308-9). It is in this moment that Beloved finally vanishes. As Lorie Watkins puts it in “Not the Same Old Faulknerian Song and Dance: Isolation in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” although it’s unclear “exactly what happens to [Beloved], she has exploded, fled,

or been expelled by the novel's end. Whatever her specific fate, she's clearly a sacrificial figure" (121). While it may be unclear what happened to *Beloved* or why it happened, it occurs simultaneously with both the intervention of the community of black women and Sethe's attack on Mr. Bodwin. The crucial difference, then, between the events that lead to the death of Sethe's daughter and *Beloved*'s "birth" and her later death was who Sethe targeted her violence toward when whiteness encroached upon her yard. In this second case, Sethe unleashes her violence upon the intruder instead of upon her own family. She attempts to maintain her boundaries through force instead of accepting their violation and destroying what she loved. Sethe's act of violence, in a seeming paradox, reinscribes the bounds of her domestic space and femininity, finally redeeming herself for her crime of child-slaying.

The climax of *Beloved* centers upon a white man approaching Sethe's yard to take yet another daughter from her, which further shows not only how the legacy of slavery, racism, and white supremacy did not disappear after the Civil War, but still continued to perpetuate itself through other means, such as capitalism. In the final section of the novel, Sethe's daughter, Denver, leaves home in order to get work and make sure that her family does not die of starvation. Doing so meant having "to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world" of 124 and enter a space where "there were whitepeople... [who] could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did" (286-87). Denver rebels against Sethe's attempt to fix her into place inside the boundaries of 124 with *Beloved*, and instead chooses to move outside of those bounds, despite the risk of having to engage with the dangers of whiteness. Denver gets a job working for the Bodwins, staying there at night just in case they need anything. It's here that Denver sees "sitting on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy's mouth full of money... His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service... Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words 'At Yo Service'"

(300). Despite the Bodwins' general kindness, their space maintains white supremacy as they literally commodify blackness through this coin jar. The black body becomes a holder for white wealth, an object to be exploited and used, always remaining at their service. While Denver's movement out of 124 might be absolutely necessary for survival and also works as an escape from the horrors of constantly reliving and dwelling upon slavery, a refusal to be fixed at that individual point in time, the world surrounding her remains founded upon white supremacy and ready to exploit her for its own pleasure. Reaction to Mr. Bodwin entering her yard and her misrecognizing him as schoolteacher, then, becomes more understandable; Bodwin may not be schoolteacher, but much like Garner, he remains a white exploiter.

By the end of the novel, as the family of 124 attempts to deal with the fallout of *Beloved* and Sethe's attack on Bodwin, the politics of privilege, motion, and boundaries seems to settle into a simple realization that there is no right or easy answer. The white family who owns 124 want to sell the house, although they decide not to evict Sethe (311-12). Denver takes up trying to manage two jobs, hoping that "with her night work at the Bodwins' and [an afternoon job at the shirt factory], she could put away something and help her mother too" (314). Stuck within a white supremacist capitalist system, Denver must take on multiple jobs to support her family at an incredibly young age, yet she lives. Sethe takes to bed, much like Baby Suggs before her, telling Paul, "I'm tired, Paul D. So tired. I have to rest a while" and eliciting his shouted reaction insisting to her, "Don't you die on me! This is Baby Suggs' bed! Is that what you planning?" (321). Much as Baby Suggs became tired after dealing with whiteness invading her yard, so too does Sethe. Bed-ridden with her house on the verge of being sold and her daughter taking up the role of breadwinner and working for white men, Sethe's future does not bode well. However, it is Paul D's final decision which conveys the text's politics of motion and boundaries. He decides that "he wants to put his story next to [Sethe's]" (322). Much as Sethe elects to lay in bed

tired, so too does Paul D lay his story and life down beside her. As he then says the pair has “more yesterday than anybody. [They] need some kind of tomorrow” (322). At this moment, discourses of movement and non-movement collide. Paul D chooses to lay down his story and fix its movement – the story of *Beloved* is “not a story to pass on” (324) – yet the pair must continue to move into the future. The text never resolves this tension surrounding the desire to rest with the demands of continuing forward, nor the tense no-win situations created within white supremacy for black individuals to deal with. Instead, the story simultaneously goes on and stops. It is laid down and no longer passed on, yet serves as the foundation for Denver and the future of American society.

Toni Morrison’s text provides the reader with her desired “bench by the road,” a place that calls to its reader to consider the immense destruction wrought by white supremacy upon black bodies. As Mandel puts it, it is impossible to provide an “adequate or suitable memorialization of the Middle Passage and of slavery” (585). *Beloved* does not even attempt to do so, but instead provides a space for the reader to do their own memorializing. The reader crosses the boundaries of the text and, upon doing so, must engage with the precise issues of boundaries and crossings, stories and movements. The issue of boundaries and movement, in all its complexity, lies in the center of the story and how it understands and depicts the marginalization of black bodies during and after slavery in America. The story never settles on an answer about what to do about slavery – the story is never laid down as Paul D’s is – nor does it provide an answer about where society should move to in the future. Instead, it insists upon a recognition of slavery and white supremacy that is simultaneously always in motion yet always fixed, constantly changing yet ever springing to life out of the story of an event like slavery that should never have happened, and should never have to be passed on.

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