"THE UNSHRIVEN DEAD, ZOMBIES ON THE LOOSE": AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN RELIGIOUS HERITAGE IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

Robert Yeates

The vast majority of critical work on Toni Morrison's Beloved has, quite rightly, read the novel and the character of Beloved through Euro-American critical perspectives, particularly psychoanalysis and the ghost story. While perspectives such as these are valuable, surprisingly little critical attention has been given to studying the influences of African religion and spiritualism and the folk traditions of the Americas.1 In fact, the novel is part of a long tradition in African American culture of signifying through the use of African and Caribbean heritage. As Beloved is a novel principally concerned with the legacy of slavery in African American identity, this shortcoming uncovers a serious absence in scholarship on Morrison's work. Rather than Morrison's novel neatly fitting into any single African or Euro-American model, numerous forces are at work. As Denise Heinze notes, Morrison is an author who "draws from, manipulates, and reinvents a super-fluidity of fantastic forms, the result of which is a profusion of personas, beliefs, and values that defy categorization and compound signification" (Dilemma 149–50). Characters within the novel display this syncretism of religious and cultural practices
reflecting the supplanting of African traditions to the Caribbean and US. James W. Coleman points out that "the complex thematic enriches the text by implying that there is a more universal religion than Christianity. This religion remains ambiguous. . . . The text critiques the Bible and also makes the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural agency supporting African American faithful vision nondefinitive, the portrayal of which makes it stronger and more substantive" (202). The fragmented and aggregate construction of Beloved in this way evokes African American identity as fragmented in its composition. As the community in Beloved gathers to exorcise the home of the protagonists, Morrison shows the uncertainty with which they make preparations: "Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there" (257). The syncretism of their religious practices here shows how the processes of slavery have disrupted and confused identity and tradition for these characters.

In demonstrating how scholarship has neglected African and Caribbean influences in Morrison's work, this essay argues that there is a conspicuous gap in classifications of the character of Beloved: that of the living-dead, the zombi, or zombie. Beloved has been described as a ghost, a reincarnation, a vampire, and a manifestation of repressed trauma, and these arguments have been convincingly demonstrated by several critics. However, while such Euro-American interpretations may go some way to explaining the origins of Beloved, there is compelling evidence that African religious concepts of the living-dead, the Caribbean concept of the zombi, and the American adaptation of the zombi as zombie all bear profound influence on the composite identity of the character of Beloved.

This layering or intertwining of various strands of cultural and religious heritage operates in a manner congruous with Ishmael Reed's Neo-Hoodooism, which in turn is modeled on the formation of Vodou in Haiti. Their religious freedom suppressed under the dominant religion of Catholicism, Haitian followers of Vodou appropriated and subverted tenets of Catholicism, reconstructing their meanings to fit traditions brought over from West Africa. This process, which fits the notion of signifying elaborated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., meant that practices in accordance with the dominant culture could be followed while still retaining personal beliefs. In Gates's definition, signifying is a process of rhetorical play that subverts a chain of signifiers to convey a new meaning. Vodou became "a religion of the oppressed that turns into a religion of triumph over the oppressor . . . a kind of exorcism, the exorcism of the stultifying mythology of the oppressor from the figures of that mythology itself" (McConnell 142).
Neo-HooDoo is Reed's translation of Vodou into a North American context, as he explains in the "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto": "Africa is the home of loa (Spirits) of Neo-HooDoo although we are building our own American 'pantheon'" (Conjure 23). The presence of Neo-HooDoo becomes, as Reed writes in "Black power poem," a "specter" of a defiant black identity, "haunting america." As with Catholicism in Haiti, however, "all the powers of old america have entered into a holy alli / ance to exorcise this spectre" (19). Neo-HooDoo therefore comes to stand for the power of signification and for the effect on African American identity of syncretistic religions and traditions. As Helen Lock suggests, subverting a chain of signifiers creates a space for identity: "Words themselves become instruments of power and control, and control over language becomes control over identity. The story thus becomes the gris-gris becomes the self" (69). Among the epigraphs to Reed's novel Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, itself a powerful articulation of signifying, is a quote from a Henry Allen, likely jazz trumpeter Henry "Red" Allen who passed away shortly before the publication of the novel: "America . . . is just like a turkey. It's got white meat and it's got dark meat. . . . Hoo-Doo is a sort of nerve that runs mostly in the dark meat, but sometimes gets into the white meat, too. . . . Anywhere they go my people know the signs" (5). Signifying operates as a secret language to those in the know. Reed's formation of Neo-HooDoo is not just a demonstration of his power in transforming literary conventions, but also an indication of the indispensable nature of signifying in the formation of an identity separate from but connected to the dominant culture.4

Beloved exemplifies this process in its simultaneous composition of the Euro-American ghost story and its evocation of African and Caribbean notions of the living-dead and the zombi. Morrison's novel enters what is a long tradition in African American culture, including the work of Reed, which signifies on texts that use Vodou and the zombi or zombie as an argument against both the rights claims of black people and their claims to humanity. Texts that have used Vodou and the zombi or zombie in this manner of reinforcing ideas of white supremacy include anthropological studies such as Spenser St. John's Hayti: Or, the Black Republic and W. B. Seabrook's The Magic Island, Benjamin Rush Davenport's novel Blood Will Tell: The Strange Story of a Son of Ham (1902), and American cinematic portrayals begun with Victor Halperin's White Zombie (1932). Reading the novel as part of the tradition that signifies on these works enables us to go beyond readings of Beloved as a ghost story to readings that far more intimately link with issues of domination and the liminal state of "social death," established by Orlando Patterson in his seminal Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, which are so crucial to understanding the processes of slavery that are at play.
The title of this essay comes from the single instance in which zombies are explicitly mentioned in *Beloved*: "Like the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chains in their hands, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other" (110). This line succinctly indicates the importance of the figure of the zombi or zombie to slavery in Morrison's novel, which is saturated with characters caught between the worlds of the living and the dead. Within the very first pages we are introduced to a baby ghost who can neither adequately communicate with the living nor rest with the dead; Baby Suggs, who cannot face living or leaving life; the absent Halle, who is thought to have died but is kept alive by the uncertainty surrounding his fate; Sixo, who sleeps like a corpse; and Sethe, who compares the space between her legs, from which life had once been born, to a grave. Life and death are not fixed or immutable concepts in this novel, but rather possess an uncanny simultaneity, and the indistinct division between the two invites several interconnected readings.

The idea of the uncanny in *Beloved* has been explored at length, but it is worth retracing the concept in light of the first authorized translation of Masahiro Mori's essay "The Uncanny Valley," which devises a means of thinking about the living-dead as uncanny entities. Mori, a robotics professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, originally published his essay in the Japanese journal *Energy* in 1970, although until recently it has received little critical attention. Mori's essay explores how robotics and prostheses aspire toward human likeness with the aim of generating "affinity" and that failure to fully realize a lifelike appearance results in a descent of affinity into an "Uncanny Valley" (98). Though at first it may appear human, the realization that a form is in fact not human plunges affinity to a negative value, which creates an eerie sensation. The addition of movement to a form steepens this valley, with the lowest value assigned to the zombie: a form as close to human likeness as a corpse, but that causes greater negative affinity because of its ability to move like a living thing (see figure 1). Any forms located in the Uncanny Valley have the ability to unsettle and disconcert others due to their uncanny qualities, and the zombie is the most profound of these due to its entrenchment in the liminal space between life and death. This trajectory accounts for the unsettling and defamiliarizing properties of the reincarnation of Beloved to the community in Morrison's novel and particularly in the reaction of Paul D. Despite the human appearance of Beloved, she is not a living person, but a corpse. As a result she is plunged into the Uncanny Valley, and this can be seen in the association of her with repressed memories, her previous incarnation as the baby ghost of 124, and her gradual movement toward becoming Sethe's uncanny double.
Initially entering the novel "out of the water," Beloved immediately invites a psychoanalytic reading, evoking an incarnation of repressed memory emerging from the unconscious (Morrison 50). As an embodiment of repressed memory, Beloved bears many of the qualities of the uncanny as described by Sigmund Freud in 1919. Freud defines the uncanny as the manifestation of repressed memory reemerging: "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (*Uncanny* 124). A memory once familiar and since buried, Beloved returns in a form unfamiliar to Sethe. Despite this, the two develop a deep bond because of the familiar qualities of Beloved for Sethe. Beloved reveals herself to Sethe incrementally, in the process becoming ever more powerful in her physical form, and her presence becomes, for Sethe, a cathartic realization. Turning to Beloved for the "unexpected pleasure" of retelling her past (Morrison 58), Sethe enacts the talking cure pioneered by Freud and Joseph Breuer, a process concerned with attempting to resurface repressed emotional responses ("Origin and Development" 184). Through this process, Sethe gains cathartic connection to a traumatic past that had been suppressed: "she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (Morrison 61). Whether or not a story "to pass on" (274), the uncanny manifestation of Sethe's guilt in the form of Beloved allows

![Figure 1. Mori's graph shows the steady incline in affinity with a form as its human likeness increases. This incline is interrupted by the unsettling effect of the uncanny. Reprinted with permission.](image-url)
for the treatment of repressed memories. Memory itself in Morrison's work is caught between a living and dead existence, both repressed to the unconscious and resurfacing in the conscious mind.

Much critical work has rightly drawn a connection between Beloved and the ghost story. Until the appearance of Beloved in physical form, the opening chapters of the novel are dominated by the presence of some haunting force in the family home of 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison makes a connection with the tradition of ghost stories explicitly clear by referring to the force as a ghost or "haint" (15). The baby's spirit in the household is a presence felt not just by Sethe and Denver, but also by Paul D, a friend of Sethe's from their past at the Sweet Home farm, and even by those who merely pass by the house. The first witnessing of this force by an outsider shows the power it holds: Paul D, as he tries to enter the house, is taken aback by a "pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood," and exclaims "'Good God. . . . What kind of evil you got in here?'' (8). There is a clear link between the uncanny and stories of the ghost or haunted house. Freud's study of the uncanny (or unheimlich in the original German) shows this: "To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts. Indeed, we have heard that in some modern languages the German phrase ein unheimliches Haus ['an uncanny house'] can be rendered only by the periphrasis 'a haunted house'" (Uncanny 148). Morrison stages the return of Beloved within this recognizable form to evoke such feelings of Beloved's uncanny presence as a dead body returning to life.5

Crucial to the importance of the uncanny in perceptions of Beloved is the notion of the double (the number of the home, 124, may be a subtle indication of the importance of this concept). Freud suggests that "shadows" and "guardian spirits" characterize the double and highlights how the double was "originally an insurance against the extinction of the self" (Uncanny 142). Beloved embodies both a shadow, in her relentless following and mimicry of Sethe, and a guardian spirit, in her repeated defense of Sethe against Denver. Several clues in the novel point toward Beloved as Sethe's double, but her awareness of past events she has not experienced offers a striking indication that Beloved may have entry to parts of Sethe's mind that could only be accessed by an uncanny double. Denver once questions this inside knowledge, asking "'How did she know?'" (Morrison 63). Beloved is aware of the right questions to ask Sethe and feeds on her stories, growing stronger in the process and becoming ever more similar to Sethe. In this way Beloved acts as insurance against the death of Sethe's memories, as a repository for stories too difficult for Sethe to carry around by herself. She becomes, as
Kathleen Marks writes, "an uncanny, preternatural, and incoherent incarnation of Sethe's desire to have back the part of herself that she cut off. . . . The uncanny here serves to bring the dead back to life" (77). Beloved, as patchwork composite, is a Frankenstein's monster, a revived phantom of Sethe's mutilated self. When we are granted a window into Beloved's interior monologue, we see this effect of the double at work: "I am Beloved and she is mine. . . . I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (210). Indeed, the two begin to look and to dress alike, sharing in an identity and even monstrously reversing the mother-daughter dynamic by the end of the novel, as Stamp Paid observes: "This one was big. She say they was holding hands and Sethe looked like a little girl beside it" (265). Though Sethe is initially Beloved's guardian, Beloved, in shadowing Sethe, slowly takes over this role. The boundaries between the two steadily become less distinct, to the point where they become rather like two parts of the same person.

What is especially problematic, however, in notions of Beloved as uncanny memory, ghost, or double, is Beloved's physical materiality and visibility for other characters. Though Beloved's presence can be explained in part through psychoanalytic means, these do not explain her very real, physical presence in the storyworld and the increasing bodily strength she gains. Until Beloved gains physical form, the spirit of the dead baby exists beyond the reach of the living. This is made clear when Sethe and Denver attempt to resolve the haunting of 124: "Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. . . . The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did" (4). It is only in physical form that Beloved can communicate effectively and gain strength, though she is still evocative of a corpse: "cold" (53), her fingers "mighty cool" (97). Somewhere between material and immaterial, human and inhuman, Beloved's existence as an uncanny entity places her at the depths of Mori's Uncanny Valley—as animated corpse. From that topos we need readings based on concepts of the living-dead, specifically the Caribbean concept of the zombi and the Euro-American concept of the zombie.

Modern Euro-American conceptions of zombies and the living-dead—popularized grotesquely in the films of George A. Romero—can be traced back through African American and Caribbean folk traditions to the religious and spiritual systems of various West African communities. John S. Mbiti's groundbreaking *African Religions and Philosophy*, the product of vast primary research, presents a general account of concurrent strains of African religious beliefs and practices. While maintaining that "the generalizations cannot be applied
to all the different African peoples" (91), his observations offer a
means of reading and understanding how many individual commu-
nities approached religious beliefs and practices. One of the most
fundamental components of many African belief systems is the idea
that death does not represent an end but rather a change in form.
Mbiti employs the Swahili words "Sasa" and "Zamani" to describe a
present, living state and the eternal past-and-future state beyond
life. As Mbiti explains, death gradually removes a person from the
Sasa (life) period into the Zamani (death) period. For a considerable
time this person will remain between the two states, in a form Mbiti
terms "the living-dead" (25). This is a component of practically all
the African societies that Mbiti analyzed. Though physically dead,
the living-dead are still people: they can return to their family and
offer a line of communication between the world of the living and the
realm of spirits and gods, knowing as they do both the language of
men and the language of the spirits and of God (83). They may also
act as guardians of a clan, or they may police tribal ethics, morals,
and customs (207). Mbiti writes, "Even if the living-dead may not do
miracles or extraordinary things to remedy the need, men experi-
enced a sense of psychological relief when they pour out their hearts'
troubles before their seniors who have a foot in both worlds" (84).
These are ideas particularly relevant to Beloved. Reminiscent of the
way the talking cure alleviates repressed memories, Beloved acts as
Sethe's confidant from the next world. Sethe feels this connection
only with Beloved: "The same adoration from her daughter (had it
been forthcoming) would have annoyed her. . . . But the company
of this sweet, if peculiar, guest pleased her the way a zealot pleases
his teacher" (57). Indeed, Denver resists allowing Sethe this release:
"Denver hated stories her mother told that did not concern herself"
(62). With Beloved, however, Sethe discovers a sense of psychologi-
cal relief in unburdening herself of the past: "It amazed Sethe . . .
because every mention of her past life hurt. . . . But, as she began
telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. . . .
it was an unexpected pleasure" (58). Beloved possesses some trait
that Denver does not, which qualifies her to be a confidant to Sethe.

The occupation of the space between the Sasa and Zamani
means that continued remembrance by their families is essential to
the existence of the immortal living-dead. The living-dead will only
move fully into the Zamani period when no one remains who knew
the deceased personally and by name: "When . . . the last person who
knew the departed also dies, then the former passes out of the horizon
of the Sasa period; and in effect he now becomes completely dead
as far as family ties are concerned. But while the departed person is
remembered by name, he is not really dead" (Mbiti 25). This seems
of crucial importance in *Beloved*, for, as Marks points out, "Beloved depends for her existence on the half-remembrances of others" (78). There are several examples of Beloved gaining strength and life through naming, but it is overtly shown when Beloved propositions Paul D in the storeroom, and repeatedly demands, "call me my name" (116). Describing the land of the dead, Beloved tells Denver: "A lot of people is down there. Some is dead." Denver asks, "You see Jesus? Baby Suggs?" Beloved replies: "I don't know. I don't know the names" (75). Trapped in the Zamani, these people whose names are forgotten will not return to the Sasa. Furthermore, Beloved is a character not gifted with her own name, but who merely assumes the single word on her gravestone. The spirit of the ghost baby with which they cannot communicate, however, is never named in the novel. It is as if the ascribing of the word "Beloved" on the headstone enables a bridge between the Sasa and Zamani, summoning Sethe's deceased daughter back to the world of the living.

Naming is also of importance in its relation to slavery. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that the characters of *Beloved* all suffer in their pursuit of identity because of naming. Paul D is merely one of many Pauls, Baby Suggs is known as "Jenny" most of her enslaved life, and Sethe's mother is nameless. Slavery has corrupted the process of naming for these characters and as such hinders their continued existence through remembering. Sethe understands the crossover between life and death through the idea of "rememory," as she explains:

Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. 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. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (36)

The line between the living and the dead is blurred for Sethe because of the process of remembering, which has the power to keep the dead alive, as it does with her absent husband, Halle: "I think he's dead," says Sethe, "It's not being sure that keeps him alive" (8). Crucially, Sethe's understanding of rememory shows that a memory belonging to one person can be seen by others. This could offer an answer to how an uncanny manifestation of Sethe's repressed memory is visible to others. Despite her connection to Sethe, Beloved is a spectral remnant from a past time and so is visible to all. Daniel Erickson likens the persistence of the rememory Sethe describes to the Victorian era's spiritualist theory of the spectral (26),
but it clearly has a compelling connection to African beliefs in the living-dead. Erickson’s analysis of *Beloved* in this way is an example of how the novel signifies on dominant cultural forms by evoking the ghost story while simultaneously telling the story of the living-dead of African religions.

Paradoxically, in many African religious traditions families will keep the dead from moving fully into the Zamani period through remembering, but the continued presence of the living-dead is often met with ambivalence. Physical death establishes a barrier between the families and the living-dead, and if the dead appear too frequently, people resent their presence (Mbiti 84). In order to remain on good terms with their departed relatives, families will often offer libations of food and follow commands when given (207–08). Geoffrey Parrinder writes that the practice of offering libations to the dead was very common among communities in Benin, in return for "help or 'fresh air'" from the deceased (150). Accordingly, Sethe offers increasing quantities of food to satisfy Beloved, until eventually the table is tipped in Beloved’s favor and Sethe begins to grow thin. The abuse of the system in this way shows Beloved’s dissatisfaction at the remembrances she has been given. Furthermore, Mbiti states, "if they have been improperly buried or were offended before they died, it is feared by relatives or the offenders that the living-dead would take revenge. This would be in the form of misfortune, especially illness, or disturbing frequent appearances of the living dead" (84). Though she does not repeatedly visit 124, Beloved stays beyond her welcome, eating more than her share of the family meals and driving Sethe to ill health. She returns as living-dead to 124 to exact revenge on those who have offended her by her murder and their failure to remember her adequately.

The manner in which Beloved grows in strength as Sethe weakens and grows smaller indicates that retribution of the living-dead is occurring in *Beloved*. The force of Beloved "ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (Morrison 250). In a manner uncannily and unnervingly reminiscent of pregnancy, Sethe plays host to a parasitic Beloved who feeds on her strength and vitality. Beloved has returned to demand recompense for the maternal contract Sethe has broken by committing infanticide. Denver becomes concerned for Sethe's safety when she witnesses Beloved choking Sethe: "I saw your face," she tells Beloved, "You made her choke" (101). Sethe also notices this threat from the presence of the living-dead, though not aware it is Beloved specifically: "for eighteen years she had lived in a house full of touches from the other side. And the thumbs that pressed her nape were the same" (98). Trudier Harris notes, however, that the continued presence of the living-dead with
the living is uncommon: "in the black folk tradition, a ghost might occasionally appear among the living—to indicate all is well, to teach a lesson, or to guide the living to some good fortune, including buried treasure," but rarely do they take up residence with the living (131). Beloved’s stay at 124, which so unnerves Paul D, raises doubts over how completely the concept of the living-dead of African origin can be applied. Clearly something else is at work here, which may be found in the translation of such beliefs into the context of slavery in the Americas.

The zombi of Haitian folklore are said to similarly persecute their offenders. As Alfred Métraux writes in his seminal study of Haitian Vodou, "a dead person will only harass the living if they neglect him, if they omit to wear mourning," or if they fail to give a proper burial place (258). Both the victims of premature death and virginal women are destined to return as zombi: "these are the wandering souls of people who perished as a result of an accident and are condemned to haunt the earth for as long as God had meant them to live. The same fate is reserved for nubile women who died as virgins." The character of Beloved approximately satisfies each of these requirements, dying before her time and of course as a virginal female. Present here too is the importance of naming: "Since a corpse can only be raised if it answers its name, it is important to prevent it from doing so. That is why sometimes the mouths of the dead are sewn up" (282). The attempt to prevent a corpse from responding to its name (and therefore becoming reanimated) shows the importance in Vodou of allowing the dead to remain at peace. The Haitian zombi is a figure that dwells in an undesirable state between life and death, although it does not possess the same privileged access to knowledge as do the living-dead of African beliefs. Rather than being a memory or rememory of living people, zombi are reanimated corpses. This is perhaps the most significant difference between the Haitian zombi and the living-dead in Africa. Beyond this the zombi has come to signify much more, and in no small part because of the influence of slavery.

Described in several ways by different writers, certain elements of the definition of the zombi remain constant. Defining the zombi straightforwardly, Métraux writes: "Zombi are people whose decease has been duly recorded, and whose burial has been witnessed, but who are found a few years later living with a boko [practitioner of Vodou sorcery] in a state verging on idiocy" (281). He continues: "He moves, eats, hears what is said to him, even speaks, but he has no memory and no knowledge of his condition. . . . Zombi are recognized by their absent-minded manner, their extinguished, almost glassy eyes, and above all by the nasal twang of their voices" (282–83). Zora Neale Hurston, who writes about her experience meeting a
African and Caribbean religious heritage in *Beloved*

zombi named Felicia Felix-Mentor in *Tell My Horse*, describes zombi as "bodies without souls," who are characterized by "broken noises in [their] throat" (179), a "blank face" (182), and "dead eyes" (195). Joan Dayan writes that the Haitian zombi is distinct even among other Caribbean religions: "In Guadeloupe and Martinique, zombi simply means evil spirit, but in Haiti the zombi undergoes a double incarnation, meaning both spirit and, more specifically, the animated dead, a body without mind" (37). Beloved clearly resembles the revenant described here. When she first arrives, Beloved possesses a notably limited mental capacity for her apparent age. Attributing her unusual behavior to an illness, Sethe and Paul D speculate, "the fever had caused her memory to fail just as it kept her slow moving" (55). Beloved is described as "breathing like a steam engine," having "sleepy" (53) "dreamy" eyes, with a voice "raspy" (54) and "low and rough" (52). Beloved’s senselessness causes her to resemble a woman "who drink[s] champagne when there is nothing to celebrate" (50). Seabrook describes meeting a zombie similarly: "The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but incapable of expression" (101). When Beloved is roused from her dreamy state and shows sudden strength Denver is also unsettled in a remarkably similar passage: "It wasn't that she was looking at that face for the first time with no trace of sleep in it, or that the eyes were big and black. Nor was it that the whites of them were much too white—blue-white. It was that deep down in those big black eyes there was no expression at all" (55). Clearly Beloved is recognizable in these physical and emotional aspects as belonging in part to the archetypal form of the zombi, more a reincarnation of body than of mind, with uncannily inhuman eyes and voice.

Another crucial aspect that distinguishes African and Caribbean beliefs of the living-dead is the fear induced by the Haitian zombi. Hurston writes of how this fear permeated Haitian society: "This fear is real and deep. It is more like a group of fears. . . . [zombification] is a horrible possibility" (179). Métraux describes how Haitians of all social classes "trembled in their youth at stories of zombi and werewolves and learnt to dread the power of sorcerers and evil spirits" (58). The fear associated with the Haitian zombi appears to result from the potential for people to be transformed into zombi themselves. Assessing the roots of the zombi figure offers an explanation for this. The Haitian zombi differs from other representations of the living-dead because of its conception in Haiti by the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue. The zombi is, primarily, a figure brought back from
Yeates

the dead for the purposes of putting the soulless body to work in inhumane conditions. Hurston writes that the zombi is transformed from "an uneducated, intelligent being to an unthinking, unknowing beast" (182). In the lone explicit reference to zombi or zombies in Beloved, this metaphor for the exploitation of labor is made abundantly clear. Paul D and forty-five other slaves are chained together while working in Alfred, Georgia. On a night of extreme weather, a mudslide enables an opportunity for escape, and they flee from the camp, still chained together, in the knowledge that if "one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none" (110). Paul D notes that until this point the slaves could only survive by "kill[ing] the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on." In effect, they assume a kind of mental death, but it is not a complete death: "Paul D beat her butt all day every day till there was not a whimper in her. . . . Life rolled over dead. Or so he thought" (109). With their escape during the mudslide, they become reincarnated: "Like the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chains in their hands, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other" (110). The runaway slaves here are loosed zombi, still enchained by the sorcery that created them, as runaway slaves still subject to the culture and laws that support slavery but liberated by their common humanity. The zombi figure is thus representative of the figure of the slave: it is bound to its master, forced to work in inhumane conditions and prevented from autonomous movement and thought: in essence, divorced from what makes it human and alive. The slaves occupy a liminal space alienated from both their past and their present homes, in the state of social death Patterson describes as resulting from a process of dehumanization leading to "powerlessness" and "degradation": what he labels a "living death" (67). Patterson's Slavery and Social Death, published in 1982 and surely an influence on Morrison while writing Beloved, shows the master-slave relationship to be parasitic, in which the dominated person is fundamentally alienated into a state of social death. Throughout the history of slavery, the idea of individuals cast into a state of living death has been a recurring metaphor—for instance, the Ancient Egyptian word for captive literally translates into "living dead" (42). No single archetype could be more ideally suited to Morrison's historical and critical novel of slavery, therefore, than the zombi.

Both Sethe and Paul D display prominent signs of an identity and autonomy lost through slavery. Like Beloved's expressionless eyes, Sethe's eyes are "bright but dead, alert but vacant" (242–43). Morrison repeats this quality of Sethe's eyes at several points in the novel, and notably attributes it to the influence of the overseer of the slaves at Sweet Home, schoolteacher: "what he did broke three
more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (9). Paul D also makes this connection, telling Sethe: "I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. . . . no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (72). The effects reach all characters whose lives were taken by slavery. The processes of slavery dehumanize in profound ways that have caused these characters to be suspended between life and death in a zombi-like state.

Initially beholden to Sethe, Beloved displays the obedience and servitude typical of the zombi: "Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. . . . Sethe was flattered by Beloved's open, quiet devotion" (57). Again, one can return to Freud and the appropriateness of the uncanny in describing Beloved's temperament. The uncanny has amongst its meanings that which is not "tame, associating familiarly with humans; . . . domesticated, friendly" (Uncanny 126). Beloved's personality at the start of her stay at 124 is generally heimlich, a domesticated and controllable nature, but she grows ever more autonomous, and unheimlich. The image of the domesticated zombi is further insinuated in Morrison's description of Beloved as bearing an expression of "petlike adoration that took hold of her as she looked at Sethe" (64). The dynamic bewilders Paul D, who tells Sethe, "I just don't understand what the hold is. It's clear why she holds on to you, but I just can't see why you holding on to her" (67). The master-slave dynamic becomes an interdependent relationship and can also potentially go some way to explaining Beloved's disappearance at the end of the novel. Confusing the white Mr. Bodwin, who now employs Denver, for schoolteacher, Sethe springs on him with an ice pick: "if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (262). As Métraux explains, if a zombi is allowed to realize its captive position, this "rouses in them a vast rage and an ungovernable desire for vengeance. They hurl themselves on their master, kill him, destroy his property and then go in search of their tombs" (283). Though a former Cincinnati abolitionist, Bodwin's subtle white supremacy is betrayed by the grotesque statuette of a "blackboy" in his office, with its "gaping red mouth" full of coins and its pedestal painted with the words "At Yo Service" (Morrison 255). In her confusion of Bodwin for schoolteacher Sethe's attack becomes a zombi-like rejection of the master, representative of slavery's rejection of white domination. Sethe having made this move, Beloved is content, "smiling," and can now disappear from 124, going in search of her tomb to be finally laid to rest (262).
Further affecting the characters' abilities to maintain their identities is, as with the displacement generated by naming, a displacement of physical place. Beloved tells Paul D that she has travelled to 124 because "I don't have nobody," and that she was actively seeking "this place. I was looking for this place I could be in. . . . Nobody bring me. Nobody help me!" (65). Paul D concurs that Beloved is "homeless and without people." Recognizing this quality in his own experience, Paul D shows rare understanding of Beloved's situation, describing how he also has always felt displaced: "Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on. Only once had it been possible for him to stay in one spot—with a woman, or a family—for longer than a few months" (66). In her zombification Beloved thus becomes emblematic of the displacement caused by slavery and the violence and rightlessness visited on African Americans during Reconstruction, the novel's fictional present. Just as the zombi and the living-dead are caught between the world of the living and the world of the dead, so too is the link between African and US religion and tradition a liminal space in which these characters are trapped. As La Vinia Delois Jennings writes, the setting "bridg[es] representations of African Americans' present and past, marking the liminal site, the crossroads, of imminent New World ancestral attrition and retention" (9). Beloved, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Sethe are struggling to hold on to their identities in a new world far removed from their origins and traditions.

Returning to Morrison's phrase "zombies on the loose," it is worth noting the spelling used here (110). Employing the spelling "zombies" may indicate that Morrison is writing with a Euro-American audience in mind more familiar with anthropological studies and Hollywood than with Haitian folklore. It may, however, be an indication that both the concepts of the Haitian zombi and Euro-American zombie are being utilized. The creation of the zombie is often described as a misunderstanding or intentional misrepresentation of Haitian beliefs in the zombi. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell indigantly describes the zombi as having been translated first into US popular culture as "a malevolent, flesh-eating vampire, a scary skeletal Frankenstein-like monster" (82). "Just mention the word 'Vodou,'" he writes, "and the American mind conjures up any number of sensational images" (57). Murrell's observations here are well founded. Following the Haitian revolution, Vodou was finally allowed to emerge from under the dominance of Catholicism, and its sudden presence shocked many visiting American writers. Subsequently, Vodou was widely demonized in the Euro-American imagination, notably in St. John's Hayti, which produced widespread contempt of Haitian rule. The creation of the zombie as a take on Haitian folklore was due in large part to the US abandonment of Haiti in 1934, at which point there was a
resurgence of accounts of Haitian culture that enforced notions of primitivism and barbarism. The void left by Euro-American influence in Haiti was portrayed frequently as a loss of benevolent, civilizing colonial rule. Early studies like Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* reinforced these ideas by portraying Haiti as having been transformed from "the richest colony in the Western Hemisphere" to "dark" and "mysterious" jungle mountains, ringing with the "steady boom of Voodoo drums" (7). Portrayals of supposed shady Vodou rituals permeated Hollywood, with the zombie epitomizing the Other. Since these disingenuous origins of the Euro-American zombie, however, the figure has followed a trajectory separate from the Haitian zombi, evolving to become a dominant icon of horror and science fiction with its own symbolic relevance to Euro-American culture.

Following that appropriation, as Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry write in "A Zombie Manifesto," the term, which was at first "just a somnambulistic slave singly raised from the dead," came to be "evil, contagious, and plural" (88). The zombie has become a creature used in a variety of fictional mediums to evoke the kind of horror that Rudolf Otto describes in *The Idea of the Holy* as "uncanny dread" (13). Otto describes two kinds of reactions to these specters of the dead that are produced, which he describes as "shudder": "disgust at the corpse’s putrefaction, stench, revoltingness," and the feeling of one's "own will to life disturbed and checked," a realization of one's own personal mortality (119). This fear of the numinous occurs at several moments in the novel. The presence of the baby ghost that so unsettles Paul D reminds him of "that headless bride back behind Sweet Home. Remember that, Sethe? Used to roam them woods regular" (13). The association here places the baby ghost in the realm of horror stories. This form of terror of the reincarnated dead is particular to such concepts of the zombie. Whereas the Haitian zombi is a fate to be feared, the zombi themselves are more likely to illicit pity (Seabrook 100). The contemporary Euro-American zombie, on the other hand, is a terrifying monster whose sole purpose is to infect and feast on the living.

This has not always been the Euro-American zombie's function. Early zombie films such as *White Zombie* portrayed zombiism as a state that could be entered and abandoned, similar to hypnosis, whose victims were most often manipulated to do the bidding of their masters. With Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), however, the modern conception of the zombie as monster materialized. Romero, as Kevin Boon writes, combined the zombie with the ghoul to form a creature, "which has lost volition and feeds on flesh" (8). This new stage in the zombie's development has taken hold of Euro-American representations, and now zombies are seldom missing the cannibal-
istic element. Multiple archetypes of the zombie have since arisen, with zombies created through biological, technological, psychological, and other means. What is curious about these representations is that the zombie is no longer solely a reanimated corpse, but can be created through a near-death state such as a coma or sickness. As a result, the boundaries between the living and the undead have become blurred, and the zombie has ceased to be the paradigm of monstrosity that it was in early Hollywood. As Kee writes, this has served only to broaden its appeal: "One's free will was at stake, as it could be devoured at any time, and in this light zombies became an allegory for the larger societal self" (22–23). The crucial dividing line, however, remains: the zombie has lost what it is to be essentially human, indeed has lost that liberty that the Declaration of Independence hallows right after life itself, and the cannibalistic motive of these monsters is a key component of their distinction from the living.

Part of the reason for the zombie's evolution into a cannibalistic monster could be the conflation, intentional or otherwise, of Vodou with the Secte Rouge. A fearful and sinister presence in Haiti, the Secte Rouge (also known as Cochon Gris, and Vinbrindingue) is rarely spoken of. As Hurston describes it, the Secte Rouge is a secret society, feared by many, whose members banded together with the single intention "to eat human flesh" (208). As Hurston writes, the Secte Rouge would often attempt to avoid discovery and arrest by concealing their practices under the auspices of Vodou ritual, allowing them to move undetected. This inevitably led the two groups to be conflated by ill-informed observers hearing only vague accounts of their practices. St. John's Hayti, for instance, emphasizes the role of cannibalism and human sacrifice in Vodou to an absurd degree. Basing his assertions on interviews, newspaper reports and court proceedings, he affirms that cannibalism "too often accompanies [the] rites" of "Vaudoux-worship" (187). He does note that while all Haitians are "tainted" by Vodou, "This does not imply that they are tainted with cannibalism or have any sympathy with its practices or beliefs in its rites" (188). Despite the clear contradiction, however, St. John presents Vodou and cannibalism as inextricably intertwined, and chooses not to acknowledge that the cannibals could be classed as a distinct group: "According to accounts published in Haytian papers . . . people are killed and their flesh sold in the market; children are stolen to furnish the repasts of cannibals; bodies are dug from their graves to serve as food, and the Vaudoux reign triumphant" (222). In fact, according to Hurston, the Secte Rouge has nothing to do with practices and beliefs of Vodou. The connection between the two, however, has been deeply entrenched by works such as St. John's and others' that contribute to portraying black self-rule as barbaric and
savage. Though this connection has since been described by several scholars, the frenzied, cannibalistic motive has become the guiding principle of the Euro-American zombie, marking it as strongly distinct from the Haitian zombi and the living-dead of many African religions.

Such grisly motives also find expression in the character of Beloved. Though Beloved’s feeding on Sethe can be associated with a vengeful spirit of African religious origin seeking greater libations, the material changes in their weight evoke Beloved’s more literal consumption of Sethe. Many critics have chosen appropriately to use cannibalistic language when discussing Beloved’s effect on Sethe. For instance, Heinze describes her as involved in the process of “consum[ing]” Sethe, “feed[ing] off of Sethe’s old stories” with a “thirst” (Dilemma 178), and Harris writes that Beloved is “like a vampire feeding vicariously” (131) and “parasitic” (132). The text of Beloved uses cognate language, as Morrison writes that “Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes” (57); and that “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (250). Sethe even feels a compulsion toward cannibalism when pregnant with Denver:

She told Denver that a something came up out of the earth into her—like a freezing, but moving too, like jaws inside. . . . Suddenly she was eager for his eyes, to bite into them; to gnaw his cheek. “I was hungry,” she told Denver, ”just as hungry as I could be for his eyes. I couldn’t wait.” . . . "here come the feet so I thought well that’s where I’ll have to start God do what He would, I’m gonna eat his feet off. I’m laughing now, but it’s true. I wasn’t just set to do it. I was hungry to do it. Like a snake. All jaws and hungry.” (31)

In a way dissimilar to the living-dead and the zombi, the figure of the zombie is present here in the obsessive feeding frenzy of these characters’ cannibalistic desires.

Sethe’s pregnancy with Denver is an episode filled with allusions not only to cannibalism but also to navigation of the space between life and death. Within the opening chapter of Beloved the space between Sethe’s legs is twice referred to in terms of a grave: first "her knees wide open as any grave," and second "her knees wide open as the grave" (5). The inclusion of the word "the" in the second utterance suggests one grave in particular and most likely brings to mind the grave of her deceased baby. Born into a position of slavery or subordination, Sethe’s children are granted neither life nor death, as symbolized by the proximity of birth and the grave between Sethe’s legs. Beloved is not the only baby to have to enter this space between life and death. Desperate to survive and give birth to
Denver, Sethe imagines the baby slowly dying within the dead body of its mother: "the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on—an hour? a day? a day and a night?—in her lifeless body grieved her so she made a groan" (31). The baby in this scenario, living housed in the dead body of its mother, can be said to be neither living nor dead. However, the roles are soon reversed and Sethe imagines herself carrying a dead baby inside her: "Sethe looked down at her stomach and touched it. The baby was dead. She had not died in the night, but the baby had" (83). Dead mother or dead baby are equally feared, and the idea of a dead body and a live body being caught together overpowers Sethe's mind. Denver contemplates that this is a "truth for all times" (35). Even during the birth the line between life and death is hazy and narrow, and Sethe cannot fully commit to allowing the baby to live: "It was stuck. Face up and drowning in its mother's blood. . . . 'Push!' screamed Amy. 'Pull,' whispered Sethe" (84). The birth of Denver and, by the insinuation of the opening chapters, the birth of Beloved are both marked by a struggle between life and death in which both children ultimately achieve only a tenuous grasp on life. They are born already zombified, of a zombified, or zombie mother.

As we have seen, Beloved as a character does not fit neatly into the concept of the uncanny, the living-dead, the zombi, or the zombie. This seems to indicate that the novel resists conforming to any prescribed, established form. Instead, Morrison combines various forms of African, Caribbean, and Euro-American traditions and culture and in so doing illuminates the needless limitations of restricting interpretations to single culturally imposed methodologies. In the process of Beloved's realization and in her eventual reduction to footprints by the stream that "come and go, come and go" (Morrison 275), Beloved is, as Harris suggests, relegated to "kinship with Big Foot and other legendary if not mythical creatures. Beloved goes from imagination to humanoid to legend" (136). Through the displacement caused by slavery, African Americans have had traditions and cultures either erased or forcibly transposed onto Euro-American models of belief, creating myriad new forms of tradition. As Reed famously attempts with Neo-HooDooism, Morrison engages with these displaced traditions and belief systems, subverting dominant cultural forms in order to sustain belief systems that have been suppressed. Formed through the mixing and competing of African, Caribbean, and Euro-American spirituality, religion, and popular culture, the hybrid assembly of the mythical and monstrous creature of Beloved establishes a new creation in an evolving transnational cultural tradition.
Notes

1. La Vinia Delois Jennings's *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* is notable among the few exceptions. K. Zauditu-Selassie's *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* addresses, among other topics, the influence of African religious practices surrounding ancestry and remembrance in *Beloved*. For African and Classical Greek origins, see also Justine Tally's *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origins*.

2. For example, for Beloved as ghost, see Heinze's *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*; for Beloved as reincarnation, see Philip Page; for Beloved as vampire, see Trudier Harris; and for Beloved as manifestation of repressed trauma, see Kathleen Marks.

3. Though the Caribbean zombi is written either "zombi" or "zombie" in the various accounts consulted, this essay will insist on the nomenclature distinction for the sake of clarity, following the example of Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry in their "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." See 87.

4. Besides the works mentioned here, Ishmael Reed develops the formulation of Neo-HooDoo especially in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Conjure* (both published in 1972). As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy writes, rather than merely featuring Neo-HooDoo as the subject, *Flight to Canada* (1976) is "Reed's first and only literary performance of Neo-HooDoo as a practice" (114): a "Neo-HooDoo slave narrative" (111), which can, like *Beloved*, be read as signifying on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

5. As Anthony Vidler writes in *The Architectural Uncanny*, such representations of the home as uncanny allow for representations of "haunting, doubling, dismembering," and showcase the "unstable nature of 'house and home'" (ix). Though the home ought to possess a sense of familiarity and immutability, the uncanny home inverts this and is significantly more poignant as a result. The instability of what should be a secure and homely domestic space highlights how slavery has displaced and unsettled the lives of Sethe and Baby Suggs: there is no homely environment for these characters.

6. Beloved as an uncanny double of Sethe has been explored at length by other critics, notably by Heinze in "Beloved and the Tyranny of the Double" and *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness".*

7. It is Dahomey (present-day Benin), home of the Fon people, that Parrinder cites as a principle place of origin of many Haitian slaves: "The Fôn word vodû for a god may be derived from vo, 'apart,' like the original sense of the word 'sacred.' The Togolese form is *vudu*, which is undoubtedly the origin of the American term *Voodoo*. Slaves from Dahomey and Togo seem to have been sent mainly to Haiti and San Domingo" (35–36).
8. Jean and John L. Comaroff show how the figure of the zombi had a resurgence in popularity in 1990s South Africa precisely because of the zombi’s economic metaphor: "They are truly cost-free labor, pure profit. Here was Marx’s dread image of the ultimate achievement of capitalism: production without human workers, the final alienation, as it were, of their species being" (39).

9. Chera Kee tracks the beginnings of the Hollywood zombie and explores the representation of the zombie as Other. Kee argues that there is a metaphorical cannibalism taking place in these films, "a cannibalism in which those notions one held to be true, the very mechanisms that one used for defining the self were slowly eaten away" (22). For the ways in which gender and race in particular are portrayed in these films see also Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s "Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie."

10. For a discussion of Otto's ideas in relation to other Euro-American monsters, see Gregory L. Reece, Creatures of the Night: In Search of Ghosts, Vampires, Werewolves and Demons.

Works Cited


