

**The Politics of Visuality in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple***

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English in Literature and Modernity

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2016

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor Dr Sandra Young for guiding me through my research and especially for her kindness, attentiveness and patience in that endeavour. I must also thank the English Literature Department at the University of Cape Town for laying such a crucial foundation for my research. I am particularly indebted to Sophy Kohler and Wesley Anderson, for their comradery and willingness to take coffee breaks.

I also give my heartfelt thanks to my partner Wesley Gush, who supports me always. His unflagging encouragement, kindness and sense of humour have meant the world to me.

Lastly, I am profoundly indebted to my parents in ways I cannot articulate. I thank them for their immense generosity and love. Their commitment to my education has involved a degree of self-sacrifice I can never repay and so I am extremely grateful.

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## ABSTRACT

The brutal history of slavery in America makes literary engagement with slave experience a potent exercise. Contemporary writers seeking to engage with this history face many difficulties, writing in the wake of the traditional slave narrative which was characterised by limited perspective and reliance on externally verifiable factors. This dissertation considers two works, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker respectively, authors who write against the template of slave narratives by offering intimate and subjective points of view to inform the story-making process. Drawing on visual theory, I consider the politics of visibility, that is to say, the privilege and disempowerment manifest in visual relations. I examine the ways in which visuality extends the efficacy of Morrison and Walker's fictional project, by contributing to a narrative form which privileges the interior life of its characters. Through their story-making process, the novels of my study offer the opportunity both to challenge and to extend an understanding of the politics of visuality. I examine how the novels encourage alternative lines of sight which, by means of their investment in an interior perspective, unsettle a disempowering visual binary and suggest a way for contemporary authors to write into the narrative gaps of history. An alternative perspective offers insight into the imagined lives of obscured or marginalised people and, ultimately, brings a fraught history into view in a way that is life-affirming and empowering.

## Chapter One:

### **Negotiating Visibility and the Returned Look**

In the aftermath of American slavery, the narrative process of depicting an enslaved experience has faced many difficulties in its attempt to do justice to a representation, not least of all the historical problem of illiteracy among the very people most affected by the institution. Any depiction of the horrors of slavery must deal with the problem of trying to bridge gaps in story-making process that are created by the issue that, historically, many slaves remained illiterate or those who suffered the brutalities of slavery were not afforded the opportunity to give an account of it. Further difficulties emerge from the challenge of depicting often horrific experiences within a narrative tradition that is marked by the dilemma of either to repeatedly lay bare the horrors of slavery or to omit and avoid the painful representation of the conditions of slavery. The conventions governing the historical narrative of slavery are also, as Cynthia Hamilton argues, subject to a “popular template”, where the narrative is focused on linear action rather than feeling, emanates from a singular point of view and relies on externally verifiable factors to lend a quality of legitimacy to the story-making processes (Hamilton 437). In a self-conscious response to these difficulties, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* emerge as novels that engage with the traumatic legacy of slavery (at different degrees of proximity to the institution), by developing a narrative approach invested with the personal, intimate and subjective. These novels go beyond the conventions of the classical slave narrative and their tendency towards what Hamilton terms, a “blinkered” representation of slave experience (436), one that favours a linear narrative from the point of view of a single individual, whose unendurable experiences lead to an escape from enslavement, a freedom often bought with isolation from familial and marital relationships (Hamilton 437). By contrast, both *Beloved* and *The Color*

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*Purple* engage with the legacy of slavery by inviting the reader into an imagined lived experience of the lives of black women living in the aftermath of slavery in ways that resist the conventional narrative templates. The narratives are imbued with intimate and thoughtful consideration of the internal life of an escaped slave and a poor, black woman, privileging “psychological time” rather than real, historical time (Hamilton 437).

In evaluating these narratives I intend to engage with Cynthia Hamilton's conceptualisation of the importance of subjective, intimate experience in the narrative process, as well as to extend her inquiry to consider how else a fictional account is able to develop a sense of internal experience. For example, *Beloved's* plot is only gradually realised, and this is done through the muddling of past and present, or through the intrusion of memory into the present moment (Hamilton 437). *The Color Purple*, through its use of the epistolary form, conveys the narrative from a very limited temporal perspective, one that only has access to how much of the story Celie has *lived*, without the benefit of retrospection (Warhol 184). Subsequently, the story-making process relies heavily on the interior consciousness of Celie as a letter-writer and is forged out of her reports and observations. The result is a narrative that engages with trauma in an immediate and focalised way, relying again on history as memory, informed by the interior world of a young black woman, rather than an externally verifiable event. Voice emerges as a powerful tool in constructing these personal histories, and Cynthia Hamilton points to how *Beloved's* characters are able to define themselves through relating their personal experiences in verbal modes of storytelling (430). In my effort to extend Hamilton's inquiry, I will consider how lines of sight operate in the novel and what effect vision might have on the task of representing these kinds of experiences.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker offer different kinds of perspective when representing black female lived experiences in the wake of slavery through the self-conscious

application of these kinds of narrative strategies. By “perspective” I mean literal lines of sight or viewing points, and not a set of owned ideas or opinions that are generated for the reader. These novels consider the means by which things come into view. *Beloved* engages with historical slave narrative by appropriating, for the purposes of fiction, the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed her daughter so she would not be returned to slavery. However, Toni Morrison writes into the gaps of that account with individual experience to render plural points of view. As a result, along with allowing for the emergence of the imagined internal life of previously enslaved people, the narrative provides juxtaposing perspectives, which throws into relief the manner in which the subject of a narrative can be “demeaned and objectified in a competing, hostile narrative (Hamilton 431). A clear example of this is the shocking moment when Sethe kills her daughter, which is conveyed entirely from the perspective of the sadistic slavecatcher, Schoolteacher, as free indirect discourse. In this choice, the novel portrays lines of sight as markers of either empowerment or disempowerment, allowing the contrast of perspectives to flesh out this fictional engagement with a complicated historical moment by representing this “hostile” perspective or objectifying point of view. However, despite the choice to convey the moment from this unsympathetic viewpoint, the scene is noticeably characterised by the slavecatcher’s reluctance or inability to look. The scene depicts four white men staring in mute horror as Sethe stares back, holding one of her babies by the heel and the other so that her head stays on (*Beloved* 177). At her feet are the inert and bloodied bodies of her other children, senseless, with their eyes flung open. Even these unseeing eyes contribute to the collective weight of what the slavecatchers revile as “nigger eyes”. The revulsion causes the mob of slavecatchers to retreat without their prey, averting their gaze, and we are told that “they didn’t look at the woman in the pepper plants with the flower in her hat. And they didn’t look

at the seven or so faces that had edged closer in spite of the catcher's rifle warning. Enough nigger eyes for now" (*Beloved* 177).

This hesitance to look contrasts effectively with Schoolteacher's uninhibited scientific scrutiny of Sethe during her enslavement (*Beloved* 192), suggesting a reversal of power relations revealed through this exchange of visual roles. Schoolteacher's position of privilege as an onlooker is challenged by the ferocity of Sethe's returned look, which he describes as the worst of them all, frenzied and eerily "all black" (*Beloved* 177). Sethe, though she might "look blind" to him (177) because of the eerie blackness of her eyes, has fixed a meaningful gaze upon her former abusers, and Schoolteacher notes that: "She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (*Beloved* 177). While the correlation between Sethe and an abused animal maintains his racist opinion of her as sub-human, Schoolteacher comes to an uncomfortable realisation of himself as the object of her gaze. His scientific examination of her while she was enslaved is juxtaposed by this reversal. Sethe's powerful stare in this scene appears overblown, unassailable, a power that seems deeply incongruous with her lived experience as an enslaved woman and certainly with Schoolteacher's opinion of her as little more than an animal.

The fantastic power of Sethe's frenzied gaze in this moment, a look that is powerful enough to deter a pack of slavecatchers who are well versed in intimidation, is a telling contrast with scenes in *The Color Purple* that depict Celie as not only the object of inspection, but as visually constrained. Nothing of Sethe's moment of visual power can be traced in Celie's habitually downcast eyes. Celie does not seem to have full ownership of her look as her visual agency is even further policed by her abusive father, who beats her for allegedly winking at a boy in Church. Celie protests: "I may have got somethin in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth" (*Purple* 6). Celie's assertion that she

does not “even look at mens” hints at what is later revealed as her homosexuality, making her self-defence an earnest truth to tell, but it also points to Celie’s understanding that she is not transgressing in the way that she is being accused. Along with acknowledging her gaze as unjustly problematic to her father, Celie anxiously appreciates the danger of his own look, trying to obstruct his view of her little sister Nettie, lest she also fall victim to his sexual abuse. For this reason, Celie, while visually inhibited, is always trying to “git in his light” (6) when Nettie catches his predatory eye. She appreciates that he is giving her the kind of look that she does not give men and therefore tries to eclipse it.

These novels suggest an underlying politics to the positions of looker and looked-at in the effort to pluralise the points of view as a strategy in the project of engaging with a traumatic history. Not only are we drawn into an experience of communal witnessing, but these scenes also demonstrate visual exchanges that help to structure the positionality of black women in a visual system that disadvantages them. For instance, these scenes promptly suggest the policing of a female spectator, the objectifying capacity of a male gaze and the subversive potential of a woman looking back. In attempting a fictional representation of the lived experience of black people in the aftermath of slavery by expanding and diversifying the points of perspective, these texts give insight into the way power is manifested through visual relationships, as these different perspectives shift. The contrast between plural points of view and a singular perspective that characterises historical slave narratives also prompts questions of what it means to relay a story from a single point of view, as in the case of Celie, but in a way that can still be a successful form of story-making.

The use of these viewpoints as a narrative strategy reveals conditions of privilege and disempowerment along these visual lines, and this binary forms the basis of my inquiry. I will examine, not only how these kinds of visual relationships are manifest in these texts and how they are negotiated, but I will also consider the value of thinking about the particular way

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visuality contributes to *Beloved* and *The Color Purple's* engagement with the history they seek to represent. In my examination of visual relationships as a political concern, I consider the manner in which theoretical insights are able to extend the efficacy of these texts in reflecting the traumatic legacy of slavery in an intimate way.

The process of looking is arguably an intimate act. It suggests a proximity and an immediacy, the kind that informs its many conceptions, such as voyeurism or witnessing. Vision locates its meaning in the personal and subjective. This investment in the personal, in the very idea of a point of view, proposes a singularity that suggests that the act of looking is not conducted between equal partners. While, as Georg Simmel theorized, symmetrical interpersonal eye-contact, or mutual visibility, forms the most essential human interaction, this investment in the subjective point of view suggests the relational quality of vision (1969). Symmetry, or directness, in looking is rare, since the unmediated gaze, a look that is never intercepted by images or discourses, is so uncommon as to feel almost impossible. This once again prompts questions about the significance of one's visual position in the action of looking, especially when that point of view is important in the production of narrative around slavery, an institution marked by limited perspectives.

Rather than mutual visibility, the logic of having "points of view" splits visual acts into a looker and a looked-at, so to speak. Thinking about vision as being divided between seeing and being seen suggests a binary of active and passive visual actions. With these qualities colouring the conception of visuality, the privilege entailed in looking is called into question. Interpersonal looking is made complex by this asymmetry, as attunement to visual privilege prompts the question of power, and asks one to consider the political ramifications of being either the looker or the looked-at. When power and privilege are manifested in a visual binary, it is necessary to ask who is disadvantaged and disempowered in the system. The relational nature of vision splits these active and passive positions as subjects and

objects, rendering the “being-seen” position as an experience of objectification. Jean-Paul Sartre points to it in his discussion of the manner in which the looker might suddenly find themselves to be a “vanishing point” at the moment when the object of his gaze looks back, thus robbing him of this visual privilege (Sartre 257). Sartre’s theory of the look deals with the notion that all other individuals seen by the subject are perceived as objects (252). However, they are apprehended as objects in a certain way. By considering individuals to be objects, he argues, it is not improbable that the objectified Other is the artificial construction of the semblance of a person, a voice recording or a perfectly engineered robot (Sartre 252). This, one acknowledges intuitively, is not the case. Instead, the apprehension of the Other reveals a distinction between the Other and various different objects in the world. The subject acknowledges that these other objects in the world are also objects for the Other. If this were not the case, the apprehension of the Other would be merely additive to those other objects occupying the subject’s visual field (254). One of the means by which the subject comes by this acknowledgement of the Other-as-object in relation to different objects is through the lines of sight. To clarify this Sartre explains his theory through his tale of the man in the park. He describes a scenario where he is walking alone in a park and because of this solitude, has autocratic power over the scene. Then another individual wanders into the scene, similarly occupied in looking around. At first, Sartre’s visual sovereignty is unopposed and he perceives this other individual as an object in the world. The other man cannot transcend his object position for Sartre as a spectator, because his visual position amongst objects relegates him to a similar object condition. However, a moment of upheaval occurs when the other man’s gaze follows a similar route to Sartre’s, but in the reverse, travelling over the lawns and eventually landing on Sartre (257). Sartre is now confronted with the notion of *himself* as object. His position at the centre of his visual kingdom fails and he finds himself to be, “a tangent, not a centre, a vanishing point, not a viewing point” as Norman Bryson explains

(89). By engaging with Sartre's insight into the power of a returned gaze, one is able to think about Sethe's look back at her pursuers as a powerful act of visual agency, a stare that confronts the objectification exemplified by Schoolteacher's scientific scrutiny of her while she was still enslaved. Schoolteacher's disquiet at the burden of too many "nigger eyes" (177) is a symptom of realising himself to be the object of *Sethe's* look.

Sartre is not the only theorist to consider the significance of lines of sight. On the contrary, theory from across the disciplines, from psychoanalysis, to sociology to film theory opens up this process for examination, with ideas converging on the notion of the "gaze", a term pioneered by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to mean an objectifying gaze informed by patriarchal ideologies and conceptualised as a white, male active look which projects its fantasies and ideas onto the image of the passive female visual object. This concept of a privileged gaze lies at the heart of my inquiry, as it helps to launch many questions surrounding the visual position of women, and more specifically, black women. For example, Schoolteacher is not disconcerted simply because he is being looked at. Rather, he is cowed by a look that comes from a female ex-slave. This binary, of course, seems simplistic and rigid, and opens itself up for critique in its very constitution, but it provides a starting point to think about the structural disempowerment of black women as it is revealed in the novels of my study, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*.

The notion of proximity and the concept of inhabiting a visual position of either privilege or disadvantage in visual acts provide an avenue to a discussion about visibility, or rather, the condition of being visible, as a way to articulate the condition of being looked-at. Visibility suggests a state of being laid bare, so to speak, for visual consumption. Within the binary I have previously articulated, one that is not interpersonal or mutual, the position of visibility is the location of disempowerment. In the moment of becoming visible, the object of scrutiny loses power, and the power dynamic becomes unbalanced. Sethe in the woodshed,

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staring down her former master, arguably serves as a potent example of this reversal, suggesting that her returned look is the foundation of subversion of the visual system constituted by imbalances of power.

This location of disempowerment through visibility is significant to the way Morrison and Walker attempt to engage with the traumatic history of slavery and its aftermath, especially considering how the condition of being visible is something that is very carefully wrought in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*. Both novels consider the position of being an object of visual scrutiny as well as the process of self-visualisation. In both novels, queries around what is visible and what is invisible, as well as how things become visible, are both a thematic and formal concern. There are many instances where Morrison and Walker not only write a scene which demonstrates how individuals look, but also carefully strategize the way things are brought into view. While representing slavery and its aftermath, these scenes demonstrate particular strategies of resistance. Significantly, they work in conversation with an archive of representation—for example, the real-life account of Margaret Garner in *Beloved's* case—which is often sensitive in nature. However, these are not always textual narratives. As fictional representations of the experience of slavery and the experience of being a black woman in the post-Civil War South, the novels work alongside a visual archive of materials encompassing photographs, woodcuts and illustrations, which is often the only visual access to the experience of slavery afforded our contemporary moment. At our remove from that historical period, this archive is what is visible of slavery now. However, there is a paradox in the logic of the constitution of archive that suggests that the archive is not visibly accessible.

In *Archive Fever*, his important text on the subject, Jacques Derrida posits that the constitution of an archive requires a physical repository for the materials. This consignment of materials to a physical locale, while suggesting preservation, also entails concealment

(Derrida 3). In other words, the archive shelters itself and conceals itself, in its very constitution. In their introduction to *Towards a Poetics of the Archive* Voss and Werner explain that in Derrida's conceptualisation of the archive there is a dual logic implicit in the constitution of archives, as the process "preserves and reserves, protects and patrols, regulates and represses" (Voss and Werner). An archive means a preservation through segregation, but it also presumes a lack. The drive towards the preservation of material suggests a dread of forgetfulness. Derrida likens this to the Freudian Death Drive, in that archiving is motivated by the fear of amnesia and in this way, presumes its own destruction (Derrida 12). He writes that "there would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression" (Derrida 19). The constitution of an archive therefore presumes a void on either side of its construction, the threat of forgetfulness and the certain obscurity into which unpreserved material has certainly been cast.

This interchange between visibility and invisibility is made more perplexing when considering other accounts of the archive which consider not only the physical repository of the material, but also "an imaginative site" (Voss and Werner i). In Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he offers his own definition of the archive that, in contradistinction to Derrida, considers it to be unrelated to a physical repository. Rather, Foucault defines the archive, first, by what it is not:

I do not mean the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity; nor do I mean the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation.  
(*Archaeology* 145)

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In this definition, Foucault does not consider the archive to be *everything*, a “sum” of material and nor is it a particular authority which undertakes the process of archiving. Rather, he considers it a collection of material that signifies a system which governs “what can be said” (*Archaeology* 145). That is to say, the archive controls, in what it preserves, what is utterable about “the appearance of statements as unique events” (*Archaeology* 145). It is therefore not inertly conserving meaning, but actively producing meaning through its constitution. Both accounts of the archive demonstrate this paradox of concealment and transparency, since by Foucault’s definition the archive still presumes a lack: that which is unpreserved and therefore unutterable.

The visual archive of slavery participates in this peculiar visibility and invisibility in another interesting way. As Stephen Best explains, the cultural imagination around the institution of slavery is informed by a visual archive that is marked by absence. In other words, so often the effort to record slavery occurred in the wake of abolition, as was the example of the project to photograph slavery in the British West Indies, resulting in an archive of images and visual material around the institution of slavery constituted at a “decades-wide remove from it” (150). Furthermore, Best points out, the archive will always be marked by the noticeable absence of works by slaves themselves:

There are no visual equivalents of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. We have yet to discover a Frederick Douglass or Olaudah Equiano of the canvas. When it comes to the representation of the inner life of the enslaved, few of our sources are visual in nature. For slaves are not the subject of the visual imagination, they are its object.  
(151)

The visual archive of slavery points to inclusion, but also to absence, bringing the historical moment of slavery into view while the same time constituting itself out of distance and remove. At the heart of this archive lies the problem of positioning the enslaved body as a

visual object. The visual archive pushes towards a kind of visibility that is paradoxically laid bare yet concealed, and, significantly, curated, positioned and by no means politically inert.

These visual archives suggest narratives concerning the image of the enslaved body following similar templates to written slave narratives. These visual narratives, in their limited points of view, their reliance on what is externally verifiable and their appropriation for other political agendas (like the abolitionist movement), emerge as their textual equivalents. The lines of sight that are offered by *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* go some way towards making visible the experience of slavery and its legacy in the South. As a fictional proxy, the points of view that crisscross the page mitigate the reliance on the archive for visual proximity to the historical moments in question. However, these novels engage with the archive, its concerns and its paradoxes, and in many ways offer a more nuanced approach to its project of representing and remembering. We are able to imagine this proximity, but are perhaps offered the opportunity to sidestep the tricky position of spectator, a position that arguably makes unbalanced visual dynamics rigid, even at a historical remove.

To illustrate this potentially problematic position of spectator, as well as how the novels engage with this concern, I turn to one photograph in particular emerging from this visual archive, a photograph known as “The Scourged Back”. In 1863, a slave referred to only as Gordon was photographed by travelling photographers McPherson and Oliver in March of that year, having escaped from his master in Mississippi and sought refuge in a Union camp at Baton Rouge (Trodd 342). The picture depicts the horrific scarring on his back from beatings. It is a powerful image, succinctly making visible the violence of slavery. The photograph was taken up by the Abolitionist movement with vigour, disseminated widely as a Carte de Visite, entitled “The Scourged Back” and thereafter was published as a woodcut in a special Fourth of July edition of *Harper’s Weekly* (Silkenat 169). The photograph appeared alongside two other woodcuts of Gordon, one as he arrived at the camp in his rags

and barefeet and the other in his uniform as a United States Soldier (Silkenat 170). The arresting nature of the widely circulated photograph prompted journalist to assert that it “tells the story in a way that even Mrs. Stowe cannot approach, because it tells the story to the eye” (quoted in Trodd 342).

This assertion points to the significant way in which the image centres itself in the visual imagination, in a somewhat eclipsing manner. The subject, a slave named Gordon, slips into the background as his disfigured back emerges as a compelling symbol. The photograph is not circulated under his name, but rather under the symbolic importance of this brutalised body. Through this circulation, Gordon’s photograph joins the ranks of other images disseminated by the Abolitionists which depicted violence against the slave body, many promoting the sensational spectacle of scenes of whippings, branding and naked and mutilated bodies (Trodd 342). All this works together to develop a certain iconography that makes the images of violence useful and productive as propaganda. The defiled slave body is made valuable and significant by this move (Trodd 342). The appropriation of his wounds for the use as a symbol and abolitionist propaganda is disconnected from his experience. This is discomfiting when considering the argument outlined by David Silkenat that posits that the narrative that frames the picture is “largely fabricated” (169). Not only are the individuals depicted in the “Gordon Triptych” in *Harper’s Weekly* all different people, but Gordon himself is the amalgamation of two escaped slaves who arrived at Baton Rouge at the same time from Louisiana (Silkenat 180). The woodcuts, as examples of representation, problematically seize this unnamed body to serve a rhetorical strategy while making no attempt to distinguish the one fugitive from the other, thus robbing him of the status of subject. According to David Silkenat, most historians have accepted their accompanying narrative to be true. It is as if the subjects are made to be completely visible, yet are unseen in a crucial way.

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As a visual record, the photograph proposes a model of a way of looking that arises out of the direct context of slavery. It is a visual relationship that renders the slave entirely visible and at the same time powerless in their<sup>1</sup> visual location. In an encounter with this kind of material, the observer of the photograph must negotiate the lines of sight that operate in this moment. In the newspaper article, the image of Peter/Gordon's scarred back is titled "Gordon Under Inspection" (Silkenat 170). This announces the rigorous way in which he was examined. The right to the inspection has already been presumed and thereafter photographs were taken of their findings. An eye runs over the image numerous times on several conceptual planes. This careful scrutiny provides an uncomfortable parallel with the inspection entailed at the auction block, where slaves were considered for their viability as property to be purchased through display and examination. With this title, Gordon is announced as a visual object for consumption, paving the way for yet more visual inspection through the production of the photograph. The enslaved body and its image as a visual object are consolidated by then becoming a symbol of brutality. Their role as this optical sign of violence is given prevalence over their subjectivity. In part, the photograph is so effective as a means of anti-slavery propaganda because of the visual positioning and through the means of the photographic medium. Firstly, the image of the scourged back is all the viewer need see, as "Gordon" is simply a shadowy profile, turned away from the lens. Additionally, the photographic medium is predicated by what Adam Frank calls "a blockage of mutual looking" (Frank 518). In other words, while possessing eyes, the subject of a photograph is prohibited from returning the gaze of his examiner. Thus, the experience of looking is a safe one, which harkens back to Georg Simmel's insights into the lack of balance in the visual relationship when one party is more visible than the other. In the moment of encountering

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<sup>1</sup> I use the non-gendered plural form of the pronoun "their" where I cannot presume the gender of the subject to whom I am referring, throughout the dissertation.

these images, the sensation of replicating this unbalanced visual relationship creates tension between the safety of looking and the feeling of being complicit. The medium of photography suggests a situation in which the viewer looks without threat of the look back. Its efficacy as propaganda rests somewhat on how readily it can be consumed. For the purposes of the abolitionist movement, this series of photographs was easily legible as an example of the evils of slavery because it played into a popular abolitionist template, one which played up the hyperbolic indecency of slavery as a means to an end. The opportunity to present a nuanced sense of character, or to allow a moment of personal empowerment for this individual whereby they might meaningfully confront the many mechanisms of racism, is given over to a discourse of victimisation. This tendency to present these individuals in these terms, Cynthia Hamilton has argued in her criticism of slave narratives, perpetuates discourses of white supremacy by aggrandising the power of slaveholding whites.

*Beloved* takes on the imagery of the scarred back and deals with it very differently, repurposing something that, for many people who encounter the photograph “The Scourged Back”, is a lingering image of the horror of slavery. Sethe pithily tells Paul D she has “a tree on her back” (18), an image the reader slowly realises is horrific keloid scarring from her mistreatment at the hands of Schoolteacher. She explains, “I’ve never seen it and I never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know” (18). Speaking about it in these metaphorical terms blunts the impact of our visualisation of Sethe’s scar, slowing down the visualising process. This measured understanding affects the positioning of the imagery, since Sethe is foregrounded and her scarring only gradually comes into view. The scar takes on a different symbolism, resisting becoming only a signifier of Sethe’s victimisation. The scar as a tree is a complex symbol; the reminder of her beating is appropriated for use as a symbol of life and fruitfulness. The

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tree is described as complete and self-sufficient, made up of all the necessary parts, and harkens to other uses of trees in the novel, compounding their efficacy as symbols of life and growth. As Michèle Bonnet argues, we are reminded of Denver's Bower where she seeks refuge from her isolation and Sixo's dancing among trees, which "whip up the flow of the blood that animates his body" (Bonnet 42). Sethe cannot or will not see the tree, and this is significant, because she is prevented from visualising her scar as anything else but a tree. Arguably, by interrupting the traditional line of sight that enforces the positioning of Sethe as a pure victim, Morrison upsets the binary of visual roles. This upheaval of the binary gives Sethe the opportunity to transcend the position of looked-at object on different terms, terms that do not rely on merely reversing the visual positions.

The capacity of the novels of my study to contest lines of sight is important to consider if one is to avoid relying on the same disempowering visual binaries as a means of subversion. Considering how Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to inform her conception of the gendered visual binary of looker/looked-at, the returned gaze is only effective as a means of subversion in that it reverses the roles rather than confounds them. Film, she argues, demonstrates a preoccupation with phallogentrism, which finds essential meaning in the image of the castrated woman (Mulvey 44). The female figure is identified primarily as one that lacks a penis, a lack that speaks to a male anxiety over castration. Paradoxically, women's symbolic importance as a marker of lack works to emphasise the symbolic presence of the phallus (Mulvey 44). In this way, the symbolic order represents women as the signifiers of castration at the same time that they represent "maternal plenitude" (Mulvey 44). The image of the female form is in a state of flux between these two poles of lack and plenitude. Therefore, as Mulvey posits,

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through

linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey 55)

Taking this dynamic into account with Sartre's idea of being a visual object as a "vanishing point", the look back seemingly has the capacity do more than simply force the acknowledgement of the individual as an object for someone else. By this account, the returned look seems to have the capacity to feminise, that is, to re-create the observer as the bearer of lack, the symbol of castration and, ultimately, the passive bearer of meaning. Adam Frank's discussion of the uncanny and affective prosthetics might be applicable here. He considers Freud's treatment of E.T.A Hoffman's *The Sand-Man*, where Freud locates the story's uncanniness in the fear of being robbed of one's eyes, which he argues is a manifestation of castration anxiety (Frank 517). The Sand-Man threatens to turn children into "something that can't look back" (Frank 517). This is consistent with Mulvey's notion of the passive looked-at object being the symbol of castration and lack. To be robbed of your eyes, therefore, is to be robbed of more than a visual privilege. Rather, it suggests being robbed of power and command over the visual system. This, however, is not to say that the female-as-spectator does not exist. Mary Ann Doane takes on Mulvey's characterisation of gendered visibility as a split between activity and passivity in her essay "Subjectivity and Desire: An(other) Way of Looking", arguing that the marginalised female spectator does possess a look, but, because of her marginal status, it is marked by its passivity in contrast to the active male gaze. This passivity manifests in ways that negate female desire arising from the visual act. Doane reflects "While the male is locked into sexual identity, the female can at least pretend she is other" (102). What might register as female desire is really just the female spectator's wish to emulate masculine desire, what Nalini Paul summarises as "the desire to desire" (6). Even in this limited, passive capacity, the returned look from the looked-at object potentially disrupts the visual status quo. Doane discusses this in the section of her essay

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titled “Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses” (104). She considers how, in visual culture, spectacles and spinsterhood seemingly go hand in hand with other “signifiers of unattractiveness” like heavy shoes and tight buns (104).

The woman who wears glasses constitutes one of the most intense visual clichés of the cinema. The image is heavily marked condensation of motifs concerned with repressed sexuality, knowledge, visibility and vision, intellectuality and desire. The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses...she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire. (104)

This cliché, however, goes hand in hand with an anxiety regarding the female look. The glasses might not be seen as pointing to deficient eyesight, but rather signify activity in looking (Doane 104). The intellectual, undesirable woman “looks and analyses, and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation” (Doane 104). The female spectator who possesses this marker of active looking is made more threatening until the “makeover moment”, where her glasses are confiscated, a moment of relief. Her ability to return the gaze is symbolically diminished and she can occupy the position of looked-at object without interruption. The returned gaze therefore recasts the roles of looker and looked-at object in a manner that is unsettling to the binary, but does not challenge its construction in a significant way. The feminising effect of the reversal simply perpetuates the conceptual link between women and lack. Without sufficiently interrupting this binary, the look back at *oneself* is problematic.

Moments of self-examination and self-visualisation occur in both novels as significant concerns. Not only does this offer insight in how to confront the problem of a look back at oneself, but it also suggests that self-examination is an important reconstructive tool after the ravages of abuse and trauma. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie’s self-examination is

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literal when she uses a mirror to look at her own genitals, and this moment leads to an appreciation of her sexuality and her subjectivity after years of sexual abuse has chipped away at her. This important scene forms the core of a discussion around the role of mirroring in Chapter Three. Contradicting a process of visibility which locates the object of the gaze as the signifier of lack and castration, Celie undertakes an act of looking that reveals not the lack of a penis, but the presence of a vagina. In trying to write subjective experience into this engagement with a fraught history, Alice Walker underlines the importance of being visible for oneself in a way that sidesteps a self-annihilating gaze. Later, I will examine in further detail the different ways in which a look back at oneself (or, indeed, an act of self-visualisation) is accomplished through mirroring and doubling and consider what else emerges when visual binaries are troubled.

When considering the visual relationships which involve a heightened visibility for the object of the gaze, an urgent concern is the possibility of sidestepping a particular visual locatedness that has been marked as disempowering. An example of this is the many cases of lynching and mob executions perpetrated against black men and women in the American South as a form of terrorism and a mechanism of white oppression. The spectacle inherent in this kind of murder not only helps the execution makes sense of itself by ritualising it in a particular way, but also legitimises the act by drawing visual correlations between lynching and executions conducted under the auspices of a judicial system. When the victim bears the spectacle of execution on their body, onlookers at the site are able to infer criminality and guilt from the image. Observers of a visual archive of lynching, while they are able to resist the assumption of guilt that once made the scene so effective for white supremacists, must still negotiate the lines of sight that render the victim highly visible. In Chapter Two, I will examine how *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* confound the lines of sight by presenting a different way to represent lynching and racialized murder. This destabilisation of the lines of

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sight has the effect of disrupting the visual binary and mitigating the spectacle of the execution. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's father's murder is perpetrated out of sight and the account of it refuses sensational detail while still capturing the traumatic effect of his death. Lynched by jealous whites, his innocence of any crime is foregrounded. In this way, Alice Walker resists the kind of imagery that might make a visual correlation with the scaffold, and instead insists that we acknowledge his death for what it is, an act of racist terrorism.

Through their narrative strategies, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison attempt to represent lived experiences marked with the trauma of violence and oppression in a recuperative, life-affirming way. Their representation of the lives of their protagonists focuses on how they emerge from their traumatic experiences, and how that are able to transcend the role of mere victim, a position that Cynthia Hamilton argues aggrandises the supremacy of whites. Understanding how visibility works as a political concern is crucial to my reading of how these authors accomplish this representational project. By examining how visual operations are manifest in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, I will discuss how visibility can deepen our understanding of the novel's efficacy, not only in revealing the challenges and difficulties of the reality that it seeks to represent, but also in demonstrating the way visual acts in the novel offer a kind of subversion that is essentially empowering and life-giving.

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### **Refusing the Spectator: The Alternative Visuality of Lynching in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved***

The question of power in visual action is a question of visibility. According to the binary that I outlined in Chapter One, through objectification by the active gaze of another, disempowerment is located in the very same place as visibility. The nature of this visibility is also significant because, as I will be discussing in this chapter, a condition of heightened or spectacular visibility has further implications for both the visual power dynamics and the project of engaging with a fraught historical moment. Due to their spectacular nature, the many horrific instances of ritualised lynching and racially-motivated executions perpetrated against black people in America on either side of the Civil War emerge as examples of this kind of high visibility. In *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, instances of racial violence and execution occur as significant events in the lives of the protagonists. These depictions offer the opportunity to discuss not only the role that these acts perform in the text, but also, in light of the theoretical insights I have discussed, the particular manner in which Toni Morrison and Alice Walker approach this facet of a painful history in their fictional engagement.

In a scene of lynching, the victim is locked into the passive visual locus and their disempowerment is exacerbated by the horrific spectacle that attends it. Not only is the victim literally the focal point in the moment of execution, this kind of death also participates in a visual culture that compounds their visibility. The spectacle inherent in this kind of murder frames the execution in a way which contributes to its ritualization. As David Garland articulates it, the high visibility of lynching contributed to a “publically available script” for the lynch mob, allowing the execution to become formulaic (807). Additionally, within its immediate context, the spectacle allows visual correlations between racialized lynching and

other types of executions conducted under the auspices of a judicial system. As I will discuss further in a moment, onlookers at the execution site read criminality and guilt on the body of the victim because of the significations the spectacle performs.

Compounding the issues around the visual location of the victim is the manner in which the horrors of lynching were captured, represented and circulated in both photographic and print media. In the scene of the act and in the lasting image of it, lynching was able to operate as a symbol of racial politics in America. Judith Stephens writes, “[f]or nearly a century, lynching was a highly visible and concrete expression of institutionalised white supremacy and a symbol of the existing power relations between the black and white ‘races’ in the United States” (655). This proliferation of pictures contributes to the narrative that attended the image. Visuality and spectacle played significant roles in the way that these images and accounts perpetuated discourses around the act of lynching, reinforcing stereotypes, providing rationalisation and establishing the act as a ritualised practice. In response to these dominant discourses, many black writers, such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Sutton Griggs and Ralph Ellison to name but a few, have zealously taken up the subject of lynching in their literary works. Historian Trudier Harris notes, in her groundbreaking book *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, that racist discourses around lynching had a profound impact on African American writers, informing a literary tradition characterised by graphic depictions of lynching (187). Presenting lynching in all its horrific details is read as part of an obligation to an oral tradition devoted to racial survival (Harris 187). The drive to counter discourses around the act of the lynching through literary representation, and the decision to invoke the visual horror of the act as a means of doing so, prompts my examination of how Morrison and Walker take on this sensitive subject matter.

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Attunement to the theoretical insights that I have engaged concerning visibility means that, to some degree, perpetuating the spectacle of the site of execution perpetuates the disempowered visual location of the victim. In a fictional representation of lynching, while able to resist the assumption of the guilt of the victim, an individual must still negotiate the lines of sight that emerge from the site of the execution. In order to further engage with dynamic, this chapter will discuss the way visuality operates in and informs the event of lynching. However, more importantly, it will consider the manner in which Toni Morrison and Alice Walker engage with this kind of violence in their representation of two very different executions: Celie's father and Sethe's mother. It will examine in particular the characteristics of their fictional representation that work to undermine the spectacle of the execution. I will discuss whether Morrison and Walker's depictions of racial execution offer a different approach to this deeply unsettling subject matter through engaging an internal and subjective perspective, and whether these depictions offer not only an alternative kind of narrative, but also an alternative kind of visual dynamic.

The lynching of Celie's father in *The Color Purple* is not a spectacular event. In almost every way, his life and death are kept out of sight. After his death, his prior existence is obscured due to the conditions of his death. Taken away in the middle of the night by a gang of white men who were jealous of his successful business, Celie's father is summarily done away with in the darkness. His presence recedes from the narrative, but the effects of his execution leave an indelible mark on Celie's life, as much of the trauma that Celie faces in her life seems to find its root in the lynching of her father. For example, his death creates a patriarchal absence that is filled by Alphonso, a man who physically and sexually abuses Celie for much of her adolescence. Additionally, the lynching caused Celie's mother so much psychological distress that, not only was she easily taken advantage of by an opportunistic Alphonso, she was also frequently unwell as a result. Her illness, and consequent neglect of

her wifely duties to her husband, provided Alphonso's initial justification to rape Celie. Along with allowing for his fatherly position to be usurped and perverted, the lynching of Celie's father results in his almost complete erasure. After learning the truth, Celie's search for her father's grave is futile since, as her stepfather eventually tells her, "lynched people don't git no marker" (*Purple* 165). This interplay of visibility and invisibility characterises Alice Walker's treatment of racial violence in *The Color Purple*. In invoking this interchange between what is visible and what is not in her depiction of Celie's father's death, Walker frames her narrative of his execution and its aftereffects in a way which is often directly counter to the highly spectacular and overblown violence characteristic of accounts of mob lynching.

Walker's account of Celie's father's death references an infamous era in American history. Following the emancipation of slaves in the United States, lynching was enacted with vicious energy between 1890 and 1940 (Garland 793) and demonstrated a clear racial bias. From 1882 to 1968, the ratio of white to black lynchings in the United States was 1,297 to 3,446, showing individual state-to-state variation that sees the ratio as unbalanced as 42 whites lynched to 539 blacks lynched in Mississippi during that period (Tuskegee Institute Archive). Even more troublingly, since not all cases of lynching were reported, it is likely that not all cases of black lynching are accounted for here. The many that were reported, however, paint a picture of a type of racial terrorism that was ritualistic, excessive and strategic. Visuality has a role to play in cementing these characteristics into the image of lynching. Occurring during a period that saw criminal justice practices become increasingly private and obscured, the widespread publicity of lynching as a pseudo penal measure is a jarring juxtaposition. Where thinkers like Michel Foucault have theorised that public execution was of a bygone age by the late 1880s, giving way to different punitive practices like the prison system (which were by nature concealed), lynching emerged as a form of

racial terrorism masquerading as a more efficient form of meting out justice. Importantly, many cases of lynching did not occur in the absence of a criminal justice system, but rather were “a preferred alternative to ‘official justice’, not a necessary substitute for it” (Garland 798). Lynching, by operating just parallel to official punitive practices, borrows legitimacy from the criminal justice system to justify the perpetration of the ritual. As well as providing rationalisation, David Garland argues that the “distinctly penal character” of lynching contributed to its strategic appeal (799). This conspicuously penal quality of lynching is helped along by the visual correlation to the antiquated, Old Europe executions described by theorists like Foucault.

Foucault argues that an integral component of public execution is how it serves its role as evidence of justice in action. The body of a condemned person served as the visual evidence of sentencing: “It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all” (Foucault 43). In this disciplinary tradition, the law becomes visible as the body is visibly afflicted. In the case of lynching, however, it is not necessarily the law that becomes visible on the afflicted body, but the racial status quo. While the spectacular executions of Europe’s old regimes worked to demonstrate the might of the sovereign over the people, lynching as racial terrorism in America worked to exhibit the continued institutionalised power of the white population over the black population. The white population turned to lynching as an act of terror because the abolition of slavery created a perceived threat to white supremacy in the South. The upsurge of lynching during a moment of tension for race and class politics was in service to white concerns over race control between the end of slavery and the advent of Jim Crow (Garland 799). The execution of Celie’s father in *The Color Purple* reads as a form of this control,

since, according to his white murderers, he has transgressed by being both black and successful. The visibly afflicted body reflects a violation of a tacit “law of the land”. As Robyn Weigman asserts: “lynching is about the law [...] the site of normativity and sanctioned desire, prohibition and taboo” (445). If race informs the execution, because the sentence is borne on the body, then the “truth of the crime” is already displayed in some way. Guilt is easily read because race makes the sentence “legible”.

The correlation between the afflicted body and guilt suggests the importance of visibility in order for the execution to function efficiently as both an act of terrorism and as a pseudo punitive practice. The practice of taking photographs of lynching means that a mechanism to perpetuate the visual import of the execution is embedded in the ritual. These photographs and photo-souvenirs were often passed among friends and sent as postcards that were “dutifully delivered by the U.S. mail” (Garland 794). David Garland’s example of a caption that would attend such a postcard reveals the way that the witness/sender seeks to compound the visual importance of the scene: “Well John—This is a token of a great day we had in Dallas, March 3rd [1910], a negro was hung for an assault on a three year old girl. I saw this on my noon hour. I was very much in the bunch. You can see the Negro hanging on a telephone pole” (794). The sender uses the caption to ensure that his position as spectator is forcefully conveyed. His repetition shows that he is adamant that he *saw* this scene from the very thick of the onlookers and takes pains to emphasise his attendance. The fact that there was a “bunch” subtly reiterates that the event was worth watching at all, reflecting a degree of community approval. Furthermore, his caption guides the eye of the addressee, pointing him in the direction of the lynching, linguistically circling the area of the image that signifies the murder to greatest effect so that addressee might also participate in the spectacle. Amy Louise Wood asserts that photography itself was instrumental in constructing discourses of white supremacy through how the photographs were posed and framed and therefore helped

to reiterate the racial status quo enforced by white onlookers. The photograph, she writes, styles race by representing a “controlled white citizenry” alongside a helpless, black “inhuman ‘fiend’”, which legitimises the execution as “cool-headed” moral action against lawless “prey” (374). Additionally, lynching photographs were lent substantial cultural power because of attitudes towards photography at the turn of the century (375), as Wood has argued:

Photography was vitally linked to modern rationalism and empiricism which invest vision with an unquestionable capability to uncover truth and validate knowledge. The photograph, in its irrefutable, indexical representation of reality, came to embody modernity’s scientific and objectifying gaze. Because the object of the gaze was abstracted from the subjective perspective of the viewer or the cameraman, the photograph created the illusion of an objective, unmediated view – a transparent reflection of reality. (Wood 376)

The objective, scientific quality of this unmediated gaze normalises and rationalises the proceedings and therefore contributes to a sense of cool-headed retribution, bolstering the very white supremacist sentiments that motivate this kind of brutality (Wood 374). The visual status quo incessantly lays the victim bare for scrutiny and voyeuristic inspection, the spectacle of the scaffold never quite losing its capacity for degradation. This is in keeping with Susan Sontag’s explanation of photography as a mechanism of objectification, since it transforms “an event or person into something that can be possessed” (72). The victim is both the object of the gaze through the spectacle of the scaffold, but also turned into an object through the mechanism of photography.

These photographs and captions represent and perpetuate a singular point of view: a spectatorial position. That is to say, not only does the photograph depict white people in the position of spectators, the circulation of lynching photographs acts as an invitation to join in

the act of witnessing the scene. This invitation is extended with the assumption of the recipient's freedom to partake in the spectacle, as well as a supposition about what being privy to such a scene signifies. The "proud gaze of the white mob in the photographs assumes a white audience that will recognise the virtue of their deed" (Apel 462). The photographs are produced under an assumption of visual privilege that is markedly white. Lynching speaks of a visual privilege split along racial lines that reinforces the notion of active looking as a white occupation. The idea that black men could be lynched for visual transgression compounds this notion of racially biased visual privilege. Dora Apel, reviewing the *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America* exhibition considers visual privilege in the context of the racially-charged South:

While it was the prerogative of whites to look at blacks, blacks could be punished—and indeed were killed—merely for looking at a white person, especially a white woman. Spectacle lynching depended on the mass looking of the crowd for its power and seduction and for its social and moral legitimacy as the embodiment of communal values of law and order, white masculine affirmation, family honor, and white supremacy. (Apel 468)

Unlike public executions of Old Europe, the spectacular nature of lynching as a contrived punitive practice was not intended to act as a cautionary apparatus for the crowd of white onlookers. The racial bias of lynching suggests that white spectators looked on without fear that they could meet a similar fate. Harvey Young quotes Elias Canetti's explanation of mob violence in order to illustrate this contrast. Canetti asserts in *Crowds and Power* that the very act of witnessing an execution ultimately results in the disbanding of the group of onlookers because the witnesses "recognize the [executed] as one of themselves . . . for they all see themselves in him" and so they disperse (Canetti 51, quoted in Young 648). Young points out that in Canetti's account of a spectacular execution, the audience and the victim are "racially

unmarked” and, by contrast, onlookers at a lynching lingered at the scene for hours, unwilling to cut the event short or waiting for the fire to cool so they might scavenge a keepsake (648). Whether or not spectators at the scene or viewers of these photographic materials were disgusted by or condemned the proceedings, it was still their privilege to look on from a position of safety. Black onlookers were not necessary for lynching to function efficiently as a deeply felt and deeply traumatic form of racist terrorism. As Richard Wright recalled about growing up in the Deep South, things did not have to happen to him directly in order to influence his behaviour as a young, black man: “I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layer of my consciousness” (Wright 190). The crowd contributed to the spectacle, but also to the unsettling juxtaposition of power and helplessness, meaning that, for black people in the South during this period, “it was enough to know that thousands of others looked and were amused” (Apel 469).

Visuality, and visual power dynamics, in the event of lynching reveal that visual privilege enforced a singular line of sight, a spectatorial look directed at the suffering of an individual pinned to a passive, object position. The victim is highly visible as this spectatorial line of sight is duplicated over and over, either as visual media in the form of photographs or postcards. Even more horribly, the victim was quite literally turned into an object when their body was dismembered and their body parts turned into commemorative souvenirs (Young). In some literary engagements, even while attempting to address the horror of the act, writers recreate the moment of lynching using the spectating crowd as an apparatus. One example of this is James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*, where, through a series of flashbacks, Jesse, a white lawman, remembers in graphic detail being taken to watch a black man be lynched by a mob of gleeful, titillated whites. Placing Jesse on his shoulders, Jesse’s father ensures that his small son is given unmediated access to the scene, inducting him into the privilege of his spectator role. Hereafter, the scene is portrayed through Jesse’s shifting gaze:

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Now he saw the fire —of twigs and boxes, piled high [...] Beyond the shifting curtain of fire and smoke, he made out first only a length of gleaming chain, attached to a great limb of the tree; then he saw that this chain bound two black hands together at the wrist [...] The hands came slowly into view again, pulled upward by the chain.

This time he saw the kinky, sweating bloody head[...] (Baldwin 947-948)

The narrative viewpoint is caught up in the spectator's viewpoint here, a sensation emphasised by the simple declarative statements of what "he saw". The positive mood of the repetition of "he saw" in this passage contrasts with the negative phrasing of what Jesse *does not* see on the way to the execution: "He had not seen [his black friend] Otis for two days; he had not seen a black face anywhere for more than two days (Baldwin 945). What follows are the graphic details of the murder, burning and castration of an unknown black man, relayed from the point of view of the spectating little boy.

This is only one example of a fictional rendering of a lynching scene, but it paints very boldly the racial bias of the spectatorial position at the site of a lynching. In Baldwin's account of Jesse's experience of watching the execution, the black population is utterly absent, bound to "come and get [the charred corpse] by and by" (950). The absence of black people from the lynching means that fictional accounts have to utilise the spectator position as means of narrating the execution. For the black onlookers in these fictional accounts, the visual experience of witnessing a lynching is delayed to the moment where they encounter the body. Ralph Ellison's brief and bitter "The Birthmark" in *New Masses* deals in painful detail with the precise moment of encountering the brutalised body. The two-page story describes a brother and sister accompanying a patrolman to determine whether a dead body in the woods—allegedly the victim of a hit and run car accident—is their little brother Willie. However, the grisly details of the state of the body leave no room for doubt that Willie was lynched. The visual emphasis in this scene is on the action of witnessing, and the importance

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of determining the truth via visual confirmation. While the patrolman advises Matt, who provides the primary point of view for the narrative, to prevent his sister Clara from looking at the gruesome sight, she insists that she has “got to know for herself” (Ellison 16). Matt searches for Willie’s distinguishing birthmark and the details of his inspection reveal the horrors of the lynched body: the “caved-in ribs”, the “fleshed hacked and pounded” and the “bloody mound of torn flesh and hair” of the castration (Ellison 16). Matt’s inspection of the body divides it up into sections, highlighting the brutality done to his brother at the same moment as his witnessing role is very literally policed by the towering lawman. Moving aside a newspaper covering the body so he can look for the birthmark, the patrolman strikes him for this impudence.

"Aw leave him alone, Turp . It don't make no difference," the coroner said. "Let him look."

Matt was dazed. He did not know what to do next and the patrolman's fingers played near his gun butt.

"I was just looking for his birthmark, suh," he said finally.

"It don't make no difference, Turp," the coroner said. "Let the boy look."

"Okay, but I don't like it," the patrolman said.

Matt looked at the coroner and saw the white man bow his head.

"It all right suh?"

"Sure, go on. You can look." (Ellison 16)

This exchange suggests the reluctance with which the white patrolman shares the visual privilege of looking at the tortured body. It also reveals both parties’ tacit understanding that Matt, as a black man, needs permission to look. The relationship between lynching and the law in this scene is characterised by the law’s ability to regulate the gaze and to refashion the sight of the body to its own qualifications. That is to say, the patrolman denies what is

visually evident from Matt's inspection of his brother's corpse, menacingly stating "just remember that a car hit 'im, and you'll be all right," (Ellison 17). As Robyn Weigman puts it, the patrolman "renarrates the body and sadistically claims it as a sign of his own power" (445).

Baldwin and Ellison provide two fictional accounts of looking at lynching and its aftereffects that point to the lines of sight involved in the act in a very profound way. Attunement to the power dynamics of visuality helps one to appreciate the way that these authors convey the juxtaposition between power and helplessness through the affective detail of their rendering. However, both the reliance on the spectatorial point of view and the acute detail of the brutality in their narratives suggest that some of the painful spectacle needs to be maintained in order for the scene to be forcefully rendered. The lines of sight in these narratives reveal both the suffering of the afflicted black body and the various forms of attendant disempowerment, emphasising the victimhood of lynched person. This careful attention to the sensitive details is an undoubtedly important mandate, since they strive to bring to light the way in which lynching was a brutal act of terrorism that served a white supremacist agenda in a multitude of ways, some of which I have already mentioned. However, by relying on maintaining a degree of the spectacle to inform these accounts, a degree of the disempowerment is maintained as well. I am interested, therefore, in what alternatives are possible in a fictional engagement. My reading of Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's engagement with the interior lives of their black characters suggests that their depictions of racially-motivated murder offer such an alternative. Offering a subjective, interior point of view of may be read as a strategy to undermine the disempowering spectacle of the lynching scaffold, but in a way that also recognises the necessity of not allowing evidence of this kind of brutality to slip out of sight.

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As I have mentioned earlier, Alice Walker does not sensationalise Celie's father's murder by providing detailed descriptions of his lynching. Her depiction of his literal and metaphorical disappearance from the narrative is perhaps in keeping with the fact that lynching was not a spectacular event for black people, but rather a more insidious form of terrorisation built on the visual implications of the execution. To put it another way, the terrorism of lynching did not rely on black people seeing the execution itself, but rather on black people knowing that white people saw it and, in some cases, were entertained by it. Keeping his murder out of sight for most of the narrative reads as a reflection of this obscurity. For black people in the South, the spectacle of lynching was displaced to an interior realm. This contributes to a deeply felt understanding of the scene without actually visually accessing it. As I discussed in Chapter One, Alice Walker's investment in the interior life of Celie, and her use of the epistolary form, focuses the narrative on what Celie has experienced and observed and therefore inhibits her ability to recount occurrences first-hand if she did not actually witness them. This means that she can only recount her father's lynching based on second-hand information, in this case a letter from her sister Nettie. This stylistically resembles the movement of the spectacle into a subjective, mental realm, not focalising on the afflicted body itself, but rather on the interior experience of "witnessing" it. Alice Walker therefore emphasises the affect of the scene, offering insight into how Celie metabolises the information of her father's brutal murder and how she negotiates the issue of spectacle implicit in his death. Instead of portraying the brutality inflicted on the body in a very detailed way, Walker focuses on the mental repercussions of looking on at the body in order to forcefully convey the horrors of lynching.

Walker's portrayal of lynching and the subsequent psychological repercussions are marked by the interplay between the visibility and invisibility of the lynched body. Both are rooted in the anxiety around lynching stigma and the urge to conceal the nature of such a

death. Celie's father's disappearance from the narrative is compounded by the community's reluctance to acknowledge him posthumously. Buried in an unmarked grave, because "lynched people don't git no marker" (*Purple* 165), his death is a painful reminder of the helplessness of the black community in the face of the brutally enforced institutionalised racism of their context. Perhaps out of a sense of self-preservation motivated by fear of the white lynch mob, or perhaps as a means to mitigate a dreadful memory, no one in the black community mentions him or the nature of his death to Celie for most of her life. The community does not ostracise Celie's mother because of her husband's lynching— As Nettie explains, "there was nothing to eat that the neighbors did not bring" (158) — but rather they become uncomfortable with her inability to keep him obscured. The treatment of his death as something to be kept out sight can be read as a means of downplaying the frightful idea of dying as a form of visual entertainment. Celie's mother attempts to reinsert him into reality, cooking and setting a place for him at the dinner table, and talking about their lofty future plans in a manner that the community finds "pitiful" (158). This is interpreted by the community as a contravention of an unspoken rule about keeping the lynched person out of sight. Celie's mother's refusal to make her lynched husband completely invisible is a discomfiting symptom of her mental breakdown, following the overwhelming sight of her husband's corpse.

Walker's account of Celie's father's body after his murder also resists sensational detail. While we are told that his corpse was "mutilated and burnt" (158), the narrative relies on the toll that the visual burden of the brutality takes on Celie's mother in order to convey the horror. We "see" the body through her inability to properly process the sight of the horror. When their neighbours bring the body home, Nettie recounts to Celie, "the sight of it nearly killed her, and her second baby, also a girl, was born at this time. Although the widow's body recovered, her mind was never the same" (*Purple* 158). By focussing on the affect of the

sight rather than the details of the horror, Walker complicates the visual relationship that might require reliance on a spectatorial point of view in order to fully convey the shock. The perspective is relayed, troubling the line of sight and making our visual access to the scene only oblique or peripheral. This approach does not simply downplay the violence of the scene, but rather offers a different insight. It offers up for discussion the issue of obscuration as a coping strategy in the wake of lynching, and how a paradox emerges where the lynched body, once so extremely visible, can be subjected to visual erasure.

Sethe's mother in *Beloved* demonstrates a keen awareness of this tension between visibility and invisibility when she anticipates that, in the case of negative outcome of her escape attempt, she will be executed as a deterrent to other potential runaways. The execution of Sethe's mother is radically different from Celie's father's lynching because her execution is a disciplinary measure that relies on visibility in order to work as a deterrent. That is to say, it is staged with the intention to dismay and horrify black spectators—in this case, other enslaved people—so that they might not consider attempting escape. Sethe's mother anticipates that in the event of her execution, her body might be mutilated beyond recognition. This is seen when she takes Sethe behind the smokehouse and points out the slave brand that distinguishes her. It operates in the same way as the birthmark that Matt looks for on his brother's body in Ralph Ellison's short story. While Sethe's experience of her mother is not extensive and is characterised by only seeing her from a distance, she recounts this memory to Denver and Beloved as the "one thing she did do" (74). In this account, Sethe's mother fervently emphasises her presence in the world through her visual characteristics: "Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, "This is your ma'am. This, "and she pointed. "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (*Beloved* 74).

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The language used here reveals an urgent insistence upon pointing; we are guided persistently towards the object of attention, the brand. In her recounting of this memory, Sethe's repetition of "right" works as a focalising tool, drawing attention closer to the body and to the branded flesh. From this extreme, point-blank perspective, the voice asserts herself as a mother using the mark that suggests her status as chattel. The visual characteristic that is intended to signify her lack of personhood is used to do the opposite. Sethe's mother attempts to refashion the brand to be the most overwhelming marker of distinction and an assertion her whole identity and existence. Sethe, as a small girl, is struck only by the exclusivity of the mark and wishes to be inducted into the same group.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too," I said. "Mark the mark on me too." Sethe chuckled.

"Did she?" asked Denver.

"She slapped my face."

"What for?"

"I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own." (*Beloved* 73)

Sethe's mother reacts violently to her daughter's slight misreading of the symbol. Sethe too readily accepts the brand to represent her mother's personhood without understanding its other implications. Using repetition again, the word "mark", as both a verb and a noun, insists upon the significance of the brand and the process of begetting it. It recalls, too, the lack of a "marker" on the graves of lynched people in *The Color Purple*. Ultimately, this mark cannot sufficiently re-assert her mother's personhood after the ravages of her execution. The brand is nullified along with her body, and with her death, the group of slaves branded with the same mark are completely lost. Sethe recounts to Denver and Beloved that "By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (*Beloved* 73).

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Once again, we do not see the actual event; the narrative does not offer to free indirect discourses that privilege one spectatorial line of sight. Like Walker's treatment of Celie's father's death, Toni Morrison relays the visual impact to the psychological, internal realm of Sethe's memory. The same occurs when Paul A is hanged after the botched escape from Sweet Home. Sethe's own visual encounter with the aftermath is peripheral. She explains that, during her escape, she passed by the victims hanging in the trees and "one had Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or his head" (*Beloved* 233). Aside from this blunted description, the effect of these scenes is dependent in Sethe's memory of them and how she relays the stories. Appealing to this interior realm means that the line of sight is reliant on Sethe's willingness to look at the violence, which is not always consistent. For instance, Sethe looks unflinchingly for her mother's brand, but hurries past "those boys hanging in the trees" (*Beloved* 233). Morrison offers a perspective from a black witness that is shifting, fractured and sometimes wavering. This non-static line of sight sometimes resists the ability to catalogue close detail of the violence done to the body and therefore allows the visual binary to fail from time to time. That is to say, the visibility or obscurity of the victim is not guaranteed in the representation of their execution. What we are presented with instead is an imaginative encounter with the inner life of a character, offering an intimate account emerging from an experience not served by conventional historical narratives.

The resistance of a static line of sight—and one that catalogues violence done to the black in close detail—might have repercussions for the issue of bodily fracture in literary representations of lynching. The physical disintegration of the body through dismemberment and mutilation was a central tenet of the ritualization of lynching. Not only is this image horrific to imagine and witness, therefore making it an effective part of the terrorism of the act, the parts of the body preserve the memory of the event. In his paper "The Black Body as

Souvenir in American Lynching”, Harvey Young is preoccupied with the gruesome image of the white mob falling upon the victim’s body in order to claim a piece of it as a memento:

Containing within itself the various features of the souvenir, the fetish, and the remain, the body part recalls and remembers the performance of which it is a part. It not only gestures towards the beliefs that motivated its theft, but also renders visible the body from which it was taken. (Young 640)

Keeping parts of the body of the lynched victim is read as a way to maintain and recall the scene. By fracturing the body into these many visible pieces, the spectacle is democratically divided up, but perpetuated. Significantly, Young notes a distinction in the scholarship around souvenirs between the desire to maintain the memory of the *scene* rather than the body of the victim itself. According to Susan Steward, this differentiates regular souvenirs from souvenirs of death (Steward, quoted in Young 647). This argument suggests that the disintegration of the body at the hands of the mob means that the lynched person disappears entirely so that the memory of the scene can be maintained. While the body part might be visible, thereby maintaining the spectacle, the person recedes from view.

In the literary engagements that I have mentioned previously, it is arguable that a static line of sight that offers

very close detail of the violence risks echoing this kind of fragmentation. In the two short narratives by James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison I have cited as examples, the singular, static point of view that catalogues the details of the horrors that are unfolding or have unfolded divide the body up as it moves over it. In *Going to Meet the Man*, the young white spectator catalogues first “two black hands [bound] together at the wrist” as soon as he spots them, then “the kinky, sweating bloody head” when it comes into view. In a slightly more subtle way, Ralph Ellison’s protagonist Matt in *The Birthmark* takes stock of the violence done to his brother Willie’s body, using the definite article “the” to list these brutalities as his eye

moves over the corpse. He “saw the jaw hanging limply against the shoulder, the mouth gaping” and, in turn, that “the ribs had been caved in” and that “the flesh was bruised and torn” (Ellison 16). The use of “the” rather than “his” could be read as Matt’s hesitance to accept the body as his brother, but it also contributes to the sense of cataloguing that arranges our sense of the body in fragments. This is brought about by the attention to close-range detail of the graphic violence.

Relaying the visual experience of both the execution and its aftermath into the subjective, and perhaps wavering, line of sight of a black witness alters the sense of bodily fragmentation slightly. It is arguable that the slightly more peripheral treatment that Alice Walker and Toni Morrison give their accounts of lynching and the lynched body does not give in to this sense of disintegration in the same way as a more direct, spectatorial perspective. The scant details of the violence done to the body that are the result of a flinching gaze or a truncated narration in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* maintain a degree of wholeness when dealing with the victim, even when their body might be physically fragmented, as in the case of Paul A. Relying on an unreliable line of sight from the subjective experience of a black witness like Sethe or Celie’s mother in order to convey the violence foregrounds the person, rather than the violence. While this runs the risk of maintaining the body’s position as the focal point in a visual field, the brutalised body is perhaps occasionally spared the glare of the onlooker as the line of sight wavers and flinches.

The condition of fragmentation due to violence and trauma is a concept that I will discuss in a more metaphorical sense in Chapter Three. This rather more literal notion of fragmenting the black body in this chapter paves the way to that discussion, by considering how damaging and unsettling the condition of disintegration can be. As an event which fragments black bodies in both metaphorical and literal ways, attention to this type of violence and its capacity to utterly disempower, terrify and subjugate black people in

America is what prompts the question of why authors should risk engaging this history at all. As Dora Apel notes in her review of *Without Sanctuary*, most people would prefer not to look on (458). She remarks that “today when we look at lynching photographs, we try not to see them” (Apel 457). The same experience is arguably true of reading accounts—even fictional—of lynching and racial murder. The reader is partially relieved when the view is peripheral, or would prefer to not experience an account of lynching at all. In the way that they mimic the gaze of a black onlooker in their fictional engagements with this history, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker present a different line of sight directed at the tortured body that, because it is not static or detailed, can trouble a visual relationship without completely obscuring the murdered person. The alternative approach, keeping the body completely out of sight, risks erasure of the victim as well as the act. Morrison and Walker acknowledge the difficulty of the spectacle in their accounts, but also demonstrate an awareness of the imperative to bear witness to this painful history. Reading their narrative strategies as a way to provide alternative points of view keeps the body in view in an oblique way, a way that emphasises the affect of lynching rather than the spectacular victimhood of the lynched person. Destabilising the visual binary even slightly goes some way to highlighting the murder rather than the victim, a strategy which tries not to sensationalise the abjection of the abused body, but resists the alternative: complete obscurity.

## Chapter Three

### **Looking Back at Oneself: Mirroring, Motherhood and Self-Visualisation**

*Beloved* opens with a mirror breaking. It is the catalyst for Buglar, Sethe's son, to run away unable to bear living in a house where "merely looking in a mirror shattered it" (*Beloved* 11). The mirror breaking signals the spiteful haunting of the baby ghost, presumed to be the little daughter that Sethe murdered to prevent her return to slavery. By preventing her family from looking at themselves in the looking glass, the baby ghost's small act of malice symbolically removes mirrors from the narrative. From the first page, a form of self-examination, of looking back at oneself, is impeded. The significance of this difficulty in looking back at oneself relates to the way I have argued that power is manifest in visual exchanges.

In Chapter One, I argued that the efficacy with which *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* are able to engage with the imagined lived experience of black women in the wake of slavery is enhanced by the way the novels offer alternative and plural lines of sight into these experiences. These lines of sight demonstrate the imbalanced power dynamics implicit in visual exchanges, while also suggesting ways in which the visual status quo can be subverted. The theory that I have engaged suggests that a visual binary separates active and passive visual actions, which calls into question the privilege present in certain positions of looking. The idea that being a passive visual object of an active looker is a position of disempowerment suggests that the status quo can be radically challenged simply by reversing these visual positions. To illustrate this, in Chapter One I drew on the moment where Sethe's frenzied returned look deeply unsettles Schoolteacher during his attempt to return her to slavery. However, the returned gaze is only effective as a means of subversion in that it troubles the visual roles rather than undoes them completely. The returned look from a visual object seems to have the ability to refashion the active observer as an object themselves, and

even to “feminise” them. Under the weight of the returned look, the active observer must now understand themselves to be the passive bearer of lack and a symbol of castration. The implication that the returned look works as a feminising force does not sufficiently interrupt the conceptual link between women and lack. This suggests further complication when thinking about what it might mean to look back at oneself. Drawing on the theoretical framework concerning the returned look, I am interested in how the idea of looking at oneself functions to extend these insights. Furthermore, the intimacy implicit in the action of self-examination presents itself as an effective means of engaging with the interior lives of individuals like Celie and Sethe, poor black women living in the wake of slavery. The way in which the look back at oneself confuses the looker/looked-at binary suggests that a look back at oneself might further destabilise the power relations of a visual binary. However, as the shattered mirror in *Beloved* suggests, this kind of self-examination is not easily realized. Not only are women disempowered by their visual locatedness, the look back must find a way to refute the causal correlation between the active look and lack. Given the way that abuse, rape and subjugation annihilate the body, the act of self-examination emerges as a way to *see* oneself after the obliterating effects of these kinds of trauma. In the novels of my inquiry, it is the effects of slavery and abuse that execute the damage to the characters’ self-image. Slavery and white terrorism in particular are cited in *Beloved* as forces that damage one’s self-image to the point that one “forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (*Beloved* 295). After the effects of these obliterating forces, an individual becomes visible to themselves in a healing and restorative way through the action of self-examination. By this argument, to look at oneself means to see presence and not absence. In this chapter, I will examine the way that the look back at oneself reflects a desire to recuperate a sense of self-worth for the female characters in the novels of my study. To this end, I will discuss the different strategies that characters like Sethe and Celie deploy to effect this action of self-

examination. These strategies, I will argue, work with a narrative process which promotes different kinds of vision and visual relationships in an effort to refuse the visual binary and challenge the supremacy of the active looker in a visual exchange.

In *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, there are two particular techniques that can be read as strategies by which the novels offer a moment to closely examine and assess the binary of subject/looker and object/looked-at that is offered by my engagement with Laura Mulvey and Jean Paul Sartre in Chapter One. As I will discuss in greater detail in a moment, *Beloved* and *Purple*, through their investment in alternative points of view as a means of engaging with particular histories, offer an opportunity to both extend and challenge the theoretical insights offered by this visual binary. For example, in similar fashion to an act of self-examination, which conflates the roles of looker and looked-at, haunting in *Beloved* complicates the visual field by being invisible. Being invisible, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, means to be present “without being an object” (quoted in Brighenti 328). The wrathful haunting by the baby ghost suggests a subtle disruption of the visual field by presenting an alternative visual dynamic in which the object position is missing. Along with the shattering mirror, the ghostly baby makes its presence known when “two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake” (*Beloved* 11). In this way the invisible ghost is still, to some degree, visible through the observable repercussions of its haunting of the house. However, this visibility is imperfect, since it is the action and not the visual object that is observable. The ghost therefore refuses the object position in a visual binary. In a similar manner, the relationship between looker and looked-at is undermined in instances where individuals are twinned or doubled with another, muddling the object position by locating the visual subject and object in the same position. By this process of mirroring the active gaze of the looker is reflected back upon themselves as their identification with the visual Other makes this an oblique act of self-examination. These “mirror moments” suggest a desire to visualise oneself, using another person as a proxy.

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These symbolic acts of mirroring can be read as a desire for wholeness when considered alongside more literal mirror moments in the text that result in the restoration of self-worth and self-esteem for individuals who have suffered the annihilating effects of subjugation and rape. The most overt example in *The Color Purple* is Celie's self-inspection of her vagina. The scene where Celie uses a hand held looking glass to look at her own genitals is the oft-touted turning point for her personal growth in the novel. Shug Avery helps Celie towards an appreciation of herself as a whole body through facilitating Celie's examination of herself:

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose.

"It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it?" [Shug] say from the door.

It mine, I say... (*Purple* 75)

This moment is read as the means by which she starts to come to terms with her abuse and triggers her sexual awakening. In order to make the link between Celie's visual appraisal of her vagina and the subsequent appreciation of herself as a whole, Daniel Ross engages Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. He argues that what is a metaphor for Lacan is literally enacted in *The Color Purple* (Ross 73). Lacan theorises that from the age of six months an infant, while surveying itself in the mirror, realises that it is witnessing its own reflection and takes on that image as itself in its "primordial form" (Lacan 45). In other words, before even possessing language, a child takes on an impression of itself as a *whole* entity that is separate from the world, an impression that solidifies the difference between "I" and the Other (Lacan 45). In contrast to this sense of wholeness, for much of the novel Celie annihilates her body, making herself "like a tree" to weather the physical and sexual abuse of her father and husband. Celie is figured as fractured and mutilated, "symbolically castrated" by her premature hysterectomy (Ross 75). Ross contends that Celie does not go through the

mirror stage prior to the moment when she looks at her vagina in the mirror, but rather, due to the lack of a positive sense of herself and “an imago to replace the parental one”, Celie is in a state of arrested development (Ross 74). He writes, “Rather than defining herself in terms of fragmentation or of lack, she must learn to define herself synecdochally, seeing part of her body, specifically her genitalia, as a sufficient symbol of herself as a whole (76).

The mirror reflects Celie back at herself, and through the conflation of visual positions, Celie is able to visualise herself as whole. Celie perceives part of herself as feminine and beautiful, “a wet rose”, and incorporates this sense of femininity into the sexual awakening that is entailed in this examination of her genitals. She appreciates her vagina as both the site of feminine beauty and sexual pleasure and associates this appreciation with ownership of her body and its parts. In gathering together these scattered pieces, “she recognizes and reclaims the fragmented parts of her body, taking pleasure in that reclamation” (Pifer and Slusser 48). According to Ross, this moment addresses Celie’s state of arrested development, and allows her to move through the mirror stage to a point where she cannot lose the sense of wholeness she has garnered, not even when Shug’s infidelity puts it to the test (82). Once again, in a literal enactment of Lacan’s metaphor, Celie examines her body in front of the mirror and miserably concludes “my skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman’s body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love” (*Purple* 235). While seemingly despairing of her worth and describing her body piece by piece, Celie maintains her wholeness and her possession of herself, acutely aware of *her* nose, *her* lips and *her* body. Celie now experiences wholeness (articulated through her repeated use of possessive pronouns in her assessment of her body) and appreciates herself as belonging to herself and not to others. To put it another way, she “repossesses” her body (Ross 70).

This overt example of the productive role the mirror plays in the text may appear to be somewhat simplistic in its self-sufficiency, but it paints boldly the outcome of an act of self-examination, which is what Ross considers “the desire for selfhood” (70). While Daniel Ross sees the mirror moment as a way to address what he interprets as Celie’s “severe autism” (74), the powerful outcome of her self-examination provides insight into the significance of looking at oneself in a more general sense. The productive consequences of this mirror moment also suggest the fraught conditions of individuals who have, like Celie, suffered debilitating traumas that have severely fractured their sense of self-worth. The positive outcome of Celie before the looking glass is not necessarily contingent on an earlier failure in her psychic development. Rather, the outcome speaks to the way in which self-examination is able to address a prior state of disintegration of selfhood for Celie, and assert her own presence to herself in a very meaningful way. Significantly, as I will discuss further in a moment, this mirror moment is not an isolated attempt by Celie to recuperate a sense of self-worth by this method. Rather, her identification with Shug Avery can be read as her desire to visualise herself as whole, and therefore revises Ross’s interpretation of the mirror moment to allow for Celie’s self-determination in the recuperation of her selfhood.

Celie’s identification with Shug Avery begins before she even meets her. Shown a photograph by her new stepmother, Shug’s glamorous image is the first photograph of a real person Celie has ever seen (*Purple* 8). Celie is instantly mesmerised and devotedly examines the picture, seeking to mirror it and recast herself as its reflection. Immediately, she attempts to dress herself in what she perceives to be the same glamorous manner in order to “fix herself up” so she might distract her father from raping Nettie while their new stepmother is ill (*Purple* 9). Later, married to Shug’s former lover, she again tries to recast herself as the woman she saw in the photograph, putting her arm around him as she imagines Shug might have (*Purple* 14). These attempts to emulate Shug’s photograph can be read as Celie’s

attempt to find a mirror image or a twin in order to address her fractured sense of selfhood. When Celie asks about who or what “Shug Avery” is, her stepmother, initially unable to supply Celie with this information, says she will find out. Eventually, “she do more then that. She git a picture” (*Purple* 9). Celie’s encounter with the photograph of Shug is only captioned by Shug’s name and the photograph lacks a clear narrative that might contribute to its meaning, but she appropriates it for her own uses nonetheless.

As Celie seeks to recreate herself in its image, the photograph performs a kind of haunting, because its lingering effect on Celie can be read as her attempt to bring the image to “life”. The photograph as a ghostly entity relates to Roland Barthes’ thoughts on encountering a photograph as inevitably related to death, since the photograph is “witness”, but by its constitution, “witness of something that is no more” (Barthes 356). That is, the moment captured in a photograph is always a moment in the past, of which the exact conditions can never be replicated or inhabited. Arguably, the “death” in the photograph is only complete through forgetfulness, where the subject matter, the “*studium*”, to use Barthes’ term, is beyond recollection. The photograph of Shug, her existence half-explained and therefore only nominally remembered, holds her existence in the text in limbo. Celie’s ekphrasis of the photograph reflects this limbo through confused tenses that position Shug in both the past and the present:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. (*Purple* 9)

For Celie surveying the photograph, Shug *was* a woman, but also *is* a woman, as she is summoned to the present moment by Celie’s scrutiny. Celie’s account of Shug begins in the past but the free indirect discourse guides the description, which cultivates an air of

immediacy in her reflections on the image. This strategy contributes to the sensation that the narrative is guided by Celie's interior life. The transcription of Celie's dialect helps this muddling of tense along by the repeated absence of the verb "to be" and explicit grammatical time references, which creates a space for the reader to interpret her qualifications of Shug in any tense. The arrival of real life Shug in the narrative allows her to transcend this limbo. In a manner similar to the character of Beloved, Shug becomes incarnate after this period of haunting Celie. The photograph proves an ineffectual mirror for Celie, since it does nothing more than continue to refract Celie's image of herself, emphasising her divided identity. In the flesh, however, Shug facilitates the moment where Celie sees herself, her presence prompting a different kind of reflective moment where Celie can appreciate parts of herself belonging to a whole.

As I mentioned earlier, the shattering of the mirror by the ghost at 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*, as an introduction to the haunting there, heralds the way mirroring scenes are woven into the account of haunting and trauma. The shattered looking glass works with other instances of doubling and twinning (like Celie's aforementioned identification with Shug's photograph) which are inherently split and fractured. This strategy in *Beloved* is suggestive of a deeply layered crisis within the lived experience of characters that sense themselves to be fractured, split or halved. Put another way, these characters are unable to see themselves and recognise themselves as whole. The text provides incomplete or unbalanced doubles and twins to suggest this destabilisation. For example, Samira Kawash considers how the home functions as a mirror image for the prison in contemporary American life, which is "sometimes referred to as the 'big house' [and] is inexorably twinned with its smaller, private counterpart" (Kawash 69). She then draws the correlation between 124 Bluestone as "Home Sweet Home" as the smaller twin to Sweet Home, the slave plantation from which Sethe escapes (Kawash 84). The haunted house, she reminds us, often figures in American gothic

literature as being symbolically haunted by the “national shame or repressed trauma of slavery” (Kawash 70). In this example, we see how the mirror image signifies trauma and fracture rather than the kind of wholeness Celie experiences before the looking glass. While signifying the characters’ desire for selfhood, the mirror image here is refracted and only half-visualised, suggesting the difficulty of this process. This refraction is evident in Toni Morrison’s formal approach, where the narrative of *Beloved* is deliberately fractured and unclear, and often privileging interior and subjective points of view. Offering the character’s perspective to inform the story-making process, the novel accommodates different acts of mirroring and doubling and allows for these reflected images to shift and change. This troubles the object position as a location of disempowerment, since that visual position is unsettled by the folding over of the line of sight. That is to say, the line of sight bends backwards and forwards, making the looker alternatively the subject and the object of the gaze due to the shifting of the reflected image.

This is especially prevalent in the deliberate confusion over the true identity of Beloved, the nineteen year old woman who appears at 124 Bluestone Road after Paul D’s stormy exorcism of the baby ghost. It is unclear whether Beloved is the same dead baby girl made flesh, Sethe’s African mother reincarnated, merely a traumatised runaway or the collective ghost of the “Sixty Million and More” slaves that perished in the Atlantic slave trade. This could be read as a form of Morrison’s strategy to avoid the reduction of African American characters to tropes, what Barbara Christian calls “the very epitome of ‘the oppressed’”, such as “The Slave, The Negro [or] The Underclass” (Christian 37). Not only are the characters imbued with “internal complexities and desires” that resist this kind of pigeonholing, but the uncertainty over the true identity of Beloved also allows her to produce multiple meanings. Rather than being a symbol, the use of doubling and mirroring allows her to actually inhabit these plural roles. In other words, Beloved can be both mother, daughter

and sister as the complicated visual field shifts. As Barbara Christian writes, “whether Beloved is in fact Sethe’s murdered child returned to her is not as important as Sethe’s belief that she is her daughter” (42). Beloved’s desire for a complete merger with Sethe, as is articulated in her monologues towards the end of the novel, not only works as a form of subversion of subject/object visual roles (as I will discuss further in a moment), but also contributes to the blurring of her identity. The multiple interpretations of her identity allows for Beloved to embody multiple meanings. This reflects both a crisis of self-image due to the brutality of slavery and offers an opportunity to address it.

One such example of the crisis of self-image can be read in the tension between maternal separation arising from enslaved motherhood and the complicated state of mother-daughter unity that it engenders. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Toni Morrison notes that slave motherhood was an “unheard-of claim” (Morrison, quoted in Darling 6), asserting that this is what makes Sethe’s action in killing her child so subversive, since she extends excessive maternal rights over her children in the face of an institution that denies her even the most basic privileges of motherhood. Becoming a mother is equated to becoming human “in a situation which is earnestly dependent on your not being one” (Morrison, quoted in Darling 6). To put it perhaps simplistically, enslaved women are troubled by the uncertainty of whether to recognise themselves as mothers or daughters at all, as the institution of slavery produces a paradox in this regard. By denying the humanity of an individual, slavery refuses the claim of motherhood over enslaved children. The repercussions of this denial of motherhood extend to a denial of daughterhood. By this formulation, an enslaved woman is denied motherhood on account of her position as “owned”, as well as being severed from origins due to the legacy of slavery. This is a condition that Saidiya Hartman articulates as a state of having irrevocably “[lost] one’s mother”, or a state of being without history, lineage and country (or motherland). This process of being orphaned was the means by which slavery

was enforced: “No longer anyone’s child, the slave had no choice but to bear the visible marks of servitude and accept a new identity in the household of the owner” (Hartman 157). The paradox that emerges from this is that the spectre of slavery lingers in a way that suggests African American women are both slave daughters and “Orphan[s]” (Hartman 199). In her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Hartman notes that during her visit to Ghana “no one failed to recognise me as the daughter of slaves” (154).

The paradox of being a daughter without a mother can be read in the many accounts of maternal abandonment or dislocation in both *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*. Mothers are missing, substituted or gradually erased. Sethe’s entire experience of her own mother is marked by remoteness from her, as she only sees her from a distance while being cared for by Nan, another enslaved woman. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two, Sethe’s mother is executed by her owners and during her execution the visual markers, which signified the distinguishing characteristics of motherhood and inclusion to a younger Sethe, were completely destroyed by the time they cut her down. Initially misreading the symbol of the slave brand, Sethe wishes for her own “mark” as a way to link her to her mother. The brand cannot perform this fusion nor can it serve as a distinguishing characteristic, since it is erased during the execution (*Beloved* 73). This scene not only speaks to losing one’s mother through erasure, but the story of her mother’s execution also stirs up the uncomfortable memory for Sethe that her mother was caught during an escape attempt by which she would leave her daughter behind to face the horrors of slavery alone. This anxiety over maternal abandonment is echoed in *Beloved*’s monologues, where she recalls a mother figure flinging herself into the sea. Her reading of this suicide as an act of desertion motivates *Beloved*’s feverish wish to reunite and be absorbed into parental unity with Sethe, who *Beloved* considers to be “the face” she sees on the woman sinking into the ocean (*Beloved* 251). This preoccupation with

maternal abandonment reoccurs in accounts of infanticide. Sethe is told about her mother's refusal to keep any of the children begotten by her frequent rapes by white men and that Sethe's mother "threw them all away" save for Sethe, who was "[given] the name of the black man" (*Beloved* 74). Ella's account of her rejection of a baby, a "hairy white thing" fathered by her rapist, who lingered for five days before dying because of Ella's unwillingness to nurse it, also echoes this kind of maternal desertion (*Beloved* 305).

Similarly, in *The Color Purple* maternal roles are fraught with contradictions, reflecting the lingering legacy of slavery in this regard. Motherhood and daughterhood are unsettled states and Celie inhabits this uncertainty. She oscillates between being either a mother or a daughter, but is also neither of these at other moments. Celie is a surrogate mother figure to her own siblings, and her stepfather forces her to be a complete substitute for her mother by repeatedly raping her when her mother is unwell and therefore absent from what he perceives to be wifely obligations to him. Celie's body seemingly becomes the site of fruitless reproduction, as the children resulting from her sexual abuse are taken away from her and supposedly destroyed, returning her to the unsettled role of daughter. She is unable to fully inhabit these maternal or filial roles and therefore unable to recognise herself as either a mother or a daughter. This contributes to the annihilation of her self-image. Her uncertainty over these roles is even evident in her early identification with Shug as a means of self-visualisation. Upon finally meeting Shug in the flesh, Celie nurses her back to health, but she uses terms that muddle her maternal and daughterly investment in her caretaker role, explaining "I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama" (*Purple* 51). For Celie, motherhood and daughterhood converge symbolically on Shug in this moment. Celie's identification with Shug as an attempt to reconcile her fractured self-image allows one to read this caretaking moment as Celie's attempt to merge these roles. Celie's desire to reconstitute herself is first attempted through this bid for motherly and daughterly fusion.

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Fusion between mothers and daughters is a central preoccupation in *Beloved* and, as I have already mentioned, the uncertainty around Beloved's true identity contributes to this sense of unity. Beloved can be read both as the spirit of a dead mother and a pre-oedipal child, who is reaching for Sethe as a daughter and as a mother. Perhaps the first hint of this conflation of female familial roles is the strange ad-hoc moniker of "Grandma Baby", which Denver uses to refer to her grandmother Baby Suggs. Jean Wyatt discusses the tension between mother and daughter roles, considering the dialogues towards the end of the novel where even the disappearance of punctuation contributes to the sense of female familial unity, the pronouns *I* and *you* edging closer together in lines like: "You are mine/ I have your milk/ I have your smile/ I will take care of you"(Beloved 255-256). However, as Wyatt notes, Beloved moves to undo completely the distinctions between these personal pronouns, insisting upon an absolute merger:

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?

I will never leave you again

Don't ever leave me again

You will never leave me again. (Beloved 256)

It seems, at least for a while, that Beloved and Sethe are achieving this oneness. The blurring of mother and daughter is very effectively rendered through the confusion of these roles for Sethe and Beloved. In the suffocating isolation of 124 Bluestone Road following Paul D's departure, Denver witnesses the muddling of maternal roles as Beloved seemingly absorbs Sethe into herself while Beloved grows in size, both metaphorically and due to her pregnancy:

Then it seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe

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became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (256)

This merging of Sethe and Beloved as mother and daughter can be interpreted as a response to Sethe's earlier infanticide of her daughter, as well as an attempt to undo this unspeakable transgression. While Sethe's murder of her children is an echo of other instances of maternal dislocation (like Ella's abandonment of children begotten by rape) it has been read as an extreme form of maternal oneness, as Jean Wyatt asserts:

Sethe extends her rights over her own body — the right to use any means, including death, to protect herself from a return to slavery — to the "parts of her" that are her children, folding them back into the maternal body in order to enter death as a single unit. (Wyatt 476)

Sethe's perception of her children as parts of herself reveals an inherent fracture, or inability to understand herself as a self-sufficient or whole entity. Like Celie, Sethe attempts to embody her daughter and her role of mother, refusing any kind of substitute. For instance, contrary to her own experience of infancy, Sethe refuses to allow anyone else but her to nurse her children. This life-giving maternal role is desecrated by the abuse she suffers at the hands of Schoolteacher's nephews, who steal her milk. In this moment, Sethe's maternal privilege is corrupted, her children's rights are usurped, and this moment deeply troubles her by undermining her ability to be a mother to her children. In a bid to address this perceived shortcoming, and because she believes the young woman to be the baby she killed, Sethe later allows Beloved to "eat" her up, figuratively absorbing her. In this act, Sethe and Beloved merge into mother-daughter unity.

Claire Kahane, in her consideration of the way in which the gothic genre deals with the spectral presence of a “dead-undead mother”, cites psychoanalytic thought concerning the pre-oedipal stage where “mother and infant are locked into a “symbiotic relation”, an experience of oneness, characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between infant and mother” (Kahane 48). According to this school of thought, the male child seeking to establish the self as separate from this maternal unity can use his physical maleness to differentiate himself from the mother. He shows a “visible sign” of difference to establish his subjectivity (Kahane 48). The female child, however, shares the female body with the mother as well as “its symbolic place in our culture”, making the struggle for subjectivity more difficult. As Kahane explains,

For women, then, the struggle for a separate identity is not only more tenuous, but it is fundamentally ambivalent, an ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both me and not me. Not only does the girl’s gender identification with the mother make it difficult for her to firmly grasp her separateness, but her mother frequently impedes the process by seeing in her daughter as a duplication of herself, and reflecting that confusion. (48)

The mirror-image strategy that conflates mother and daughter in the novel contributes to this peculiar sense of unity, peculiar because it is marked by the separation which appears endemic to motherhood under slavery. Celie’s quiet appreciation of her vagina – “It mine” (*Purple* 75) – recalls Sethe’s satisfied “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine” (*Beloved* 236), which is twice echoed in “I am Beloved and she is mine” (248) (253). But even this articulation is troubling. As Jean Wyatt notes, “You are mine” echoes a slave-owner’s claim over the body of the black subject (482). While locked in a “self-consuming mother-child circle” (Wyatt 482), *Beloved* undermines Sethe’s subjectivity rather than bolstering it. When *Beloved* is gone, Sethe finds herself returned to her fractured state, which we see when Paul

D offers to bathe her and she ponders whether she will be bathed in sections, “First *her* face, then *her* hands, *her* thighs, *her* feet, *her* back? Ending with *her* exhausted breasts?” (*Beloved* 321, italics mine). The bathing process is a journey between the significations that Sethe’s body has been called to perform. It begins with her face, which Beloved wished to merge with, and encompasses the chokecherry tree on her back representing the brutality done to her body as a slave. The attention then moves to her feet that were nearly ruined in her escape attempt and finally ends with the “exhausted breasts” with no more milk to give. Sethe’s self-imposed excessive maternal obligations are at end, but her body is mapped in a way which signals the interconnectivity of all the parts of her life, and hints at the possibility of wholeness.

The residue of her oneness with Beloved also allows her to realise her self-worth, for when she laments “She was my best thing” (321), the correlation between Sethe and Beloved as a unit makes Paul D’s assertion “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322), easier for Sethe to “recognis[e] herself in the first person singular” (Wyatt 484). Paul D’s explanation to Sethe reminds her of her ownership of her own body, and affirms her subjectivity by immediately reiterating “You are”. The present tense of the verb locates Sethe in her immediate existence, performing in itself a small exorcism for a woman whose past has literally haunted her until now. This resonates in *The Color Purple* where Celie’s wariness of the present tense in the opening lines of Walker’s novel, striking through “I am” in the sentence “I am a good girl”, for something more historic: “I have always been a good girl” (*Purple* 3). By the novel’s end, Celie exchanges “I am” for “I be”, which in its construction underlines the state of *being* and is also in keeping with Celie’s self-affirming rejection of standard English as part of her transformation from her former fractured selfhood (*Purple* 195). As Pifer and Slusser assert, “rather than allowing others to own individual parts of her, such as her sexuality or her language, Celie now owns and enjoys her total self” (49) Celie ultimately gives up Shug as a

potential double of herself and concludes “If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (*Purple* 257).

The visual metaphor of the shattered mirror as a symbol of haunting in *Beloved* brings the reader back to the figure of Beloved as an imperfect mirror-image, refracting mother and daughter. By being, in some hazy way, *both*, she might be read as an attempt to address the paradox of being both motherless *and* the unmistakable daughter of slaves that we see emerging in Saidiya Hartman’s search for roots. Morrison, in addressing a dearth of mothers and daughters, presents her readers with a woman who manages to be both, emerging from an institution that denies her either position. She serves a complex function in novel because of the various readings which seek to explain her true identity. As both the image of mother and daughter in a strange, circular lineage, we might think of her haunting as two mirrors facing each other, an endless *mise en abyme* of souls, reduplicating to encompass the “sixty million and more” black subjects who were destroyed by the Atlantic slave trade. As Morrison asserts, the incarnation of Beloved is an exercise in refusing amnesia:

The purpose of making her real is making history possible, making memory real — somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be. (Morrison, quoted in Darling 6)

Given Toni Morrison’s project of making history manifest, or “real”, in the embodiment of Beloved, we might think about Beloved as a reminder of the lives that have slipped out of view. By allowing her to be both mother and daughter, as well as the survivor of a slave ship, Beloved echoes the lives of people who are completely forgotten by history. Her story of is one of many stories in an archive that would otherwise be invisible. Importantly, her story isn’t representative of slave history as a whole, but more of a moment of clarity in a palimpsest, or a small window into something rendered opaque otherwise. This is a process that Morrison calls “assuming responsibility” for these forgotten individuals, the

means by which we can shrink the gap between past and present. History is not vaguely conceptualised, it is *possible*. The invisible spectre of slavery's abuses becomes visible, transcending time and space, and the reader is drawn into a witnessing role alongside Sethe, her family and this black community on the outskirts of Cincinnati. *Beloved*'s story functions under the attitude of recovery that marks the constitution of archives. The multiple interpretations of *Beloved*'s true identity allow for her to speak to multiple representational gaps. *Beloved* forces those who encounter her to consider the people who have slipped out of view and through her, even in a small way, "history sits down at the table" (Morrison, quoted in Darling 6). However fraught an encounter with *Beloved* may be, Morrison's investment in "assuming responsibility" suggests that it is essential that oblivion is avoided. She reflects the notion that it is necessary for these ghastly encounters not to slip so completely into what Morrison has deemed a "national amnesia" or willed forgetfulness.

However, *Beloved* is not simply a haunting slave experience made visible; her humanity alters the way she reminds us of invisible lives. Unlike a picture or image representing slaves or even the institution of slavery itself (and if we accept that she is either a baby ghost, Sethe's reincarnated mother or a survivor of the Middle Passage) her subjectivity modifies the way she represents this experience. She is able to articulate this experience in her own words and thoughts, offering insight and access that evades other examples of visible history within a visual archive. The stream-of-consciousness aspect of *Beloved*'s monologues could be interpreted as a direct link between a visual encounter with the experience of the Middle Passage and her thoughts about the horrors that embroiled her. By this interpretation, we are given unfettered access to extremely painful scenes from within her mind as she metabolises what has happened to her. Her observations are the means by which she can articulate the burden of that experience, bringing slavery's hidden and oblique abuses into view.

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That is not to say, however, that the encounter with Beloved and the experiences she articulates are without ambivalence. While the incarnation of Beloved can read be as Toni Morrison's attempt to counter the "national amnesia" around slavery, the young woman's appearance in the narrative also represents Morrison's desire to put painful memories to rest. She has said of her work that it should "bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded" (Morrison, *Memory, Creation and Writing* 389). As Ashraf Rushdy has articulated it, Beloved's incarnation reveals the wish for "a necessary remembering and an equally necessary forgetting" (569). Put another way, Beloved is brought into view so that she can be properly buried, and in this act, a painful history can give way to a hopeful future. Again, this laying to rest is negotiated in ways that appreciate Beloved's humanity. During the exorcism that the community perform at 124 Bluestone Road, the free indirect discourse presents the scene of Sethe and Beloved standing hand in hand on the porch from the perspective of the gathering townsfolk. The crowd is "surprised by the absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her" (261). Anticipating the horror of a reincarnated ghost, they are instead confronted by a human woman, "naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun" (261). Her human form facilitates their ability to confront her, despite the trauma from which she emerges. In the wake of the exorcism, Beloved vanishes. Reports are uncertain: "Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes", but Paul D knows she has been laid to rest.

Beloved receding from the narrative allows for Denver to emerge as a figure of hope. In an early interview with Gloria Naylor in 1985 while she was still writing *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explained that her intention was to eventually give the story over to Denver, saying she would first extend the life of Sethe's murdered baby. Morrison would extend "her search, her quest, all the way through as long as I care to go, into the twenties where it switches to this other girl" (Morrison, quoted in Naylor 29). At this early stage in the writing process,

Beloved is the reincarnated baby ghost and Denver's sister. Beloved and Denver, as two daughters, emerge as doubles of each other. In this doubling, Ashraf Rushdy sees their dual task as representing "a double perspective of accusation and hope, of criticising the past and caring for the future" (Rushdy 575). Beloved, while giving voice to a severe critique, represents only half of Morrison's work: "the accusing glare, the unforgiving perspective, the need to forget" (Rushdy 578). Denver, on the other hand, represents "the embracing glance, the loving view, the need to remember" (Rushdy 578). In handing over the narrative to Denver, Morrison finally adopts her point of view, the perspective of hope. Denver's ability to inhabit this role is bolstered by the way she splits from the maternal fusion with Sethe and Beloved (Wyatt 483). Jean Wyatt considers how Denver abandons one form of maternal intimacy for another, but with a crucial difference (483). After leaving Sethe and Beloved, Denver goes to Lady Jones, a woman who taught her to read when she was a child. Not only does her sudden appearance cause Lady Jones to recognise Denver as the "child of the community", but her move into this new maternal-filial relationship also demonstrates the unviability of the maternal fusion she has left behind. Denver moves away from the oppressive past, offering hope and the opportunity to "prepare for the present and live it out" (Morrison, *Memory, Creation and Writing* 389).

Denver's visual activity is notably different to Beloved's in that it is characterised by variety. Beloved's look is marked by its own self-absorption. Through the mechanism of mirroring and identification that I have discussed, Beloved's visual fixation with Sethe can be read as obsessive self-scrutiny. We are told that "Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe. Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindling, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (67). She is preoccupied by the search for "her face" and is galvanised by the sight of Sethe, since she says "I saw her face coming to me and it was my face too" (253). Beloved considers her reflection in the river, "gaz[ing] at her gazing face", in a section of the

novel which makes it unclear whether she is indeed looking at herself or at Sethe. Denver, by contrast, enacts many different visual actions. Denver is the habitual witness, and exhibits an incisive gaze that allows her to hypothesise that Beloved is her baby sister returned from the dead. She correlates Beloved's attributes with an earlier scene that she witnessed through a window:

When Denver looked in, she saw her mother on her knees in prayer, which was not unusual. What was unusual (even for a girl who had lived all her life in a house peopled by the living activity of the dead) was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist. (35)

In this moment, Denver quite literally sees what no one else sees, layered over a scene she frequently observes. Again recalling this moment, she witnesses Sethe's near strangulation by an unknown force in the clearing, and Denver, "watch[ing] the faces of the other two", accuses Beloved by saying "'You did it, I saw you'" (119). Her visual acuity is also applied to carefully watching Sethe for warning signs: "her eye was on her mother, for a signal that the thing that was in her was out, and she would kill again" (283). Visual activity sustains Denver, but is complemented by an especial delight in being looked at herself, because "for Denver, looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite" (139).

It seems deeply incongruous to find pleasure in being looked at, given the way that the theory I have engaged has figured it as disempowering. In this case, however, Denver's pleasure in being looked at refuses the passivity of objectification, and indeed, her conceptualisation of the look is almost transcendent of her physicality.

It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other. Having her hair examined as a part of her self, not as material or a style. Denver's skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and

bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was. (*Beloved* 139)

Here, Denver delights in being looked at, which is characterised as gently being brought into the visual field in an uncritical way. This kind of look is juxtaposed with the disempowering scrutiny of the white male gaze, which is signified in the narrative by Schoolteacher and his notebooks. The distinction between “herself” and “her self” is also significant, emphasising that the look that she so enjoys appreciates the parts of her as belonging to a whole self. In contrast to a gaze that splits the body into fragments –again we might recall Schoolteacher inscribing his notebook with two columns that contrived to split the black body into animal and human characteristics– this is a look that reconstitutes the parts of her body into a whole. Denver relishes this experience, and willingly submits to being “pulled into view”.

It is arguable, given the visual acuity that characterises Denver, that she is using the gaze of another person as a form of self-visualisation. This description of the effects of being looked at comes to us in Denver’s words, bolstering the idea that she is appropriating a look in order to “see” herself. Unlike other characters who might perform an act of self-scrutiny by examining someone they set up as a double or twin, Denver appropriates the gaze of others in order to visualise herself. In this manner, by redefining the gaze in her own terms, Denver subverts the conventional visual binary in a very interesting way. She finds space outside of the binary in order to consolidate “her self”. Like Celie in front of the looking glass, Denver is able to consider herself as part of a whole, but she does this without the use of either a proxy or an actual mirror. In a sense, the value that Denver places in both looking and being looked at constitutes a holistic self-image. The inability to visualise the self that is suggested throughout the text, signalled at the very first page by the shattering of the mirror, is revised in Denver. Denver’s visual agency goes some way to putting the mirror back together.

## Conclusion

Denver emerges at *Beloved's* conclusion as the “daughter of history” who signifies hope for the future (Rushdy 578). As the novel tracks her development from her isolated childhood to adulthood, she comes to embody one half of the double perspective that characterizes Toni Morrison’s fictional project: “the embracing glance, the loving view, the need to remember” (Rushdy 578). Denver’s development takes on one half of the perspective that Morrison considers to be the perspective of a black woman writer, that is, “one who look[s] at things in an unforgiving loving way [...], writing to repossess, re-name, re-own” (Morrison quoted in Russell 45). Like Celie’s first person narration in *The Color Purple*, the story-making process finds room for joy along with the anguish. In *Beloved*, Denver’s visual acuity not only allows her to bear witness to the events at 124 Bluestone Road in thoughtful detail, but her keen sense of the past and her ability to visualize it also ultimately facilitate her capacity to pass on the story to the larger community. Denver’s process of self-visualization, a process I have argued is a subtle appropriation of the onlooker’s gaze, is a crucial factor in her ability to act as witness and as narrator. This is due to the fact that her process of self-visualization is also a process of reconciling the turmoil of past and present that characterizes her life as a young woman living in the wake of slavery. The way that Denver visualizes herself is similar to the project of “seeing” history, and in turn, crucial to the way Toni Morrison engages with this particular moment.

As black woman writers, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison offer the opportunity to explore this “unforgiving loving” perspective in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*. My study has examined Morrison and Walker’s investment in intimate and subjective lines of sight in their fictional rendering of the lived experiences of black women in the post-Civil War era. This intimate perspective offers an alternative to the limited, first-person narration that

characterises the non-fictional slave narrative literary tradition, which is characterised by its reliance on externally verifiable factors. By contrast, in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*, the intimate lines of sight allow for subversion within a disempowering visual system. Both novels engage with the traumatic legacy of slavery by rendering subjective points of view, a process which reveals the underlying politics of being either the ‘looker’ or the ‘looked-at’ in a visual relationship and the relations of dominance it signals. The theoretical insights that have informed my study have been focused on the notion of visibility and a binary separating active and passive visual positions. A visual binary informed by visibility calls into question the privilege present in certain positions in the act of looking. Another way to express this visual binary is to consider being looked at as a process of objectification. Jean Paul Sartre’s theory of the look explains this, where the original looker becomes a “vanishing point” as soon as their look is returned, meaning that the returned look robs them of their visual privilege. Laura Mulvey’s theory of the gaze is another key concept in this discussion. Her theory of the gaze particularly considers the white, male active look projected on to a passive female visual object. The notion of the privileged gaze has guided my inquiry, leading in to discussions of the visual position of women, particularly black women, and the different strategies that might unsettle disempowering visual privilege.

In their fictional engagement with slavery and its aftermath, both Morrison and Walker place an importance on what is visible and invisible, as well as the means by which this historical moment becomes visible. Visual theory has yielded insights which have facilitated my reading of *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* as texts that demonstrate the politics of visual relations through their articulation of the imagined experiences of individuals who are not served by historical record or a visual archive. The politics of visibility helps to express disempowerment in the novels, while these novels offer moments of subversion that disrupt the visual status quo. The theory of the gaze has facilitated my examination of the

novels as texts which seek to write into the gaps of the existing archive, providing insight in a way that does not perpetuate the disempowerment or problematics of a visual binary which locks characters into a position of unrelenting victimhood.

In trying to understand the implications of Toni Morrison's and Alice Walker's fictional engagement with this particular historical moment, my study considered what of slavery was visible. Fictional representations of slavery and its aftermath like *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* work beside a visual archive made up of woodcuts, photographs and illustrations which inform the often limited interaction that people have with the historicity of slavery. Reading visibility into the fictional rendering of the lives of their characters contributes to an intimate sense of this history and mitigates a reliance on an archive marked by paucity and amnesia. Because the visual archive is marked by the absence of works by slaves themselves, slaves are the object, not the subject of the visual imagination (Best 151). Therefore, the images that form the archive lack the subjective character that might avoid the problem of the slave body being a perpetual object of inspection. By being permanently scrutinised, the images in the archive, often depicting black pain and racist brutality, run the risk of perpetuating the disempowerment of the subject. Attending to this problem, *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* thread multiple perspectives through the archive, a mechanism I have argued unsettles this perpetual visual locatedness.

Theory around visibility yielded insights which facilitated my discussion of the alternative methods *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* employ as they seek to represent an often painful history. In relation to the issue of visibility as the site of disempowerment, I considered the many horrific instances of spectacular lynching of black people in America as an example of high visibility translating to a position of extreme disempowerment and helplessness. This form of racial terrorism was profoundly informed by visibility and contributed to an unsettling visual culture and history. In my second chapter—which dealt

with the issue of lynching and the visual politics of both the event and fictional representations of it—I considered in particular the manner in which Alice Walker and Toni Morrison dealt with this fraught imagery. I was interested in the interplay of visibility and invisibility woven into the visual culture around the event, since at one moment the victim is rendered extremely visible and helpless— an almost permanent condition as the imagery of the event lingers—and then at another moment, they are utterly obscured, hidden and shielded from view. Given my discussion of how these authors invoke an intimate line of sight in their engagement with this history, I argued that they produce a perspective that went some way towards troubling the spectacle of lynching and the significations that high visibilities allowed it to produce. This perspective is characterised by the subjective quality of the narration, and is therefore inconsistent, wavering and often resistant to sensational detail. Considering how other representations of lynching utilise either the spectatorial viewpoint to convey the horrors of lynching, or offer a detailed catalogue of the brutality after the fact, Morrison and Walker relay the image into the psychological realm of the characters in order to highlight the lingering visual impression rather than the tortured body itself. I considered the extent to which this strategy unsettles the perpetual looked-at position of the victim, which obscures the victim entirely.

This idea of developing an alternative way of looking as a means to negotiate the visual status quo also informed my discussion in Chapter Three, which concerned the issue of looking back at oneself. The insights offered by the theory that I have engaged suggests that the returned gaze has the capacity to destabilise a disempowering visual binary, but does not completely undermine the conceptual link between the visual object and lack. This is an issue that poses questions for instances where the looker and the looked-at object are the same person, as it would be in the case of self-examination. I considered whether the conflation of the visual roles of looker and looked-at might completely undermine the visual binary to the

point that the act of looking at oneself reveals wholeness rather than lack. Considering the effects of trauma, rape and abuse as an annihilating force, I interpreted *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*'s depictions of the act of self-examination as a means to recuperate a sense of personhood by presenting characters like Celie and Sethe with the opportunity to see themselves as whole people, rather than fractured. Not only does the act of self-examination reflect a desire to recognise oneself as a presence and not an absence, it also offers a recuperative moment. In the novels of my study, the act of self-examination is not always easily accomplished, with the shattering of the mirror in *Beloved* as a metaphor representing this difficulty. Rather than rely specifically on mirrors as a means to accomplish self-visualisation, the novels offer mirror-moments through doubling and twinning as an attempt to create the two halves of a fractured self. The desire to see oneself is most potently manifest in Denver, who relishes being looked at or "being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other" (*Beloved* 139). While Celie in *The Color Purple* performs an act of recuperative self-scrutiny by examining herself in the mirror, Denver appropriates the gaze of others so as to achieve a sense of herself as a whole through self-visualization. She redefines the gaze in her own terms and finds space outside of the visual binary in which to draw the parts of her self-image together.

Denver's consolidation of her self-image is not the only way her visual activity is significant to Toni Morrison's fictional engagement with history. Denver's point of view is one that reflects the complications of living in the wake of trauma and trying to reconcile with the past in order to make room for the future. While we are told that "the present alone interested [her]", Denver *sees* the past layered over her present. Facilitated by the well-worn narrative of her birth, Denver traces out the story during a walk in the woods:

Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes on the path she followed away from the window. There was only one door to the house and to get to it from the

back you had to walk all the way around to the front of 124, past the storeroom, past the cold house, the privy, the shed, on around to the porch. And to get to the part of the story she liked best, she had to start way back: hear the birds in the thick woods, the crunch of leaves underfoot; see her mother making her way up into the hills where no houses were likely to be. (*Beloved* 36)

Here, Denver “sees” the past drama of her mother’s escape from slavery overwritten onto the present and appropriates an imagined line of sight which provides access to the scene of her birth, a scene that had no witnesses apart from Sethe and Amy Denver, the white runaway. This scene, however, is the only one that preoccupies Denver, who dislikes all other stories about a historical moment from which she was absent. Her disdain for the “gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it” (*Beloved* 74) contrasts with Beloved’s curious hunger for Sethe’s stories of her enslaved past. Beloved frustrates Denver by taking “every opportunity to ask some funny question and get Sethe going” (*Beloved* 75). As Ashraf Rushdy notes, Denver is unable to avoid the past indefinitely, because her recognition of Beloved as an incarnation of history’s ghost means that she is forced to acknowledge the past as “an immediate pain to her present life and an incipient danger to her future” (579). Denver’s reconciliation of the past and present is effected through a revision of the history from which she emerges. She comes to acknowledge the communal history of slavery, understanding her mother’s unspeakable act “in light of a larger narrative” (Rushdy 581). Denver’s reconciliation of the larger narrative of the past with her present also comes to signify the process of recognizing the balance of visibility and invisibility in that endeavour. She reflects Toni Morrison’s revisionary project. Morrison has stated that her work “must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out” (Morrison, *Memory, Creation and Writing* 389).

The way that Denver's multiple perspectives emerge as a way to visualize herself echoes Morrison's project of making history visible. Denver's visual acuity suggests a way of utilising the various lines of sight in a way that contributes to a holistic image of the past that makes the future possible. The alternative perspectives emerging from the psychological worlds of *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* thus offer a different way of confronting the visual and literary archives of slavery. Denver's appropriation of the gaze in order to visualise herself suggests a way to incorporate even the spectatorial line of sight into the project of remembering. This incorporation develops a sense of communal witnessing where the subjective intervention contributes to the historical revision. As a means of paving the way to narrating this history, the reader is drawn into a communal witnessing, but a witnessing that often fails or flinches. The telling of history's story brings into view what must be witnessed and allows that which does not serve to fall into the peripheral vision of the narrative process. This is perhaps a necessary failure, recalling Judith Butler's discussion of Emmanuel Levinas' conception of the 'face'. Butler posits that representations of trauma cannot fully be captured, that is to say, fully represented, without a degree of effacement. Paradoxically, Butler argues that it is in the failure of representation that "the human is indirectly affirmed" (Butler 144).

Attunement to the visual offers an important way to recognise the structures of power in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple*. The visual contributes to the novels' fictional project by supporting, and even extending, their investment in the subjective experiences of their characters. Attention to visibility yields a sense of these imagined lives in an attentive, intimate way and suggests a strategy for undertaking the often difficult task of remembering slavery and its aftermath. By incorporating an understanding of the visual into the project of remembering — and remembering through a rendering of history that is necessarily subjective — the narrative process both accommodates and addresses the gaps in that history.

Visuality allows one to read these novels as an invitation to imagine or to “remember” in a way that acknowledges the necessary failures in representing this history. As a result, the lines of sight that Toni Morrison and Alice Walker use to render the lived experiences of their characters in *Beloved* and *The Color Purple* contribute in a fundamental way to their role as powerfully life-affirming texts in the face of the brutal history of slavery.

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