In this essay, more than any other in the book, I make the case for viewing narrative as rhetoric through an appeal to the phenomenology of reading. In seeking to link the experience of reading with the activity of interpretation, I experiment with the form of the standard critical essay by deliberately employing multiple voices and styles, juxtaposing a somewhat lyrical expression of response with abstract theorizing and a stream-of-consciousness account of reading and responding to the character of Beloved. Like the other essays in this book, this one is concerned with tapping into the intuitive experience of reading and articulating its bases in order to express cognitively what we experience intuitively. In the fourth section, in particular, I attempt to stay very close to that intuitive experience even as I inevitably move to more abstract cognition.

The motivation for this experimentation with form arises from the specific hypothesis I want to advance: some textual recalcitrance cannot be fully explained, even though it functions very productively in our reading; the focus on Beloved tries to get at an instance of that recalcitrance, while the analysis of the narrative’s ending seeks to explain the character’s productive functioning. In developing the case, I also reflect on the powers and limits of interpretation’s desire for mastery.
The imagination that produces work which bears and invites rereadings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a sharable world and an endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language sharable imaginative worlds.

—Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark

Reading Beloved

I am in Beloved and Beloved is in me.

Like Stamp Paid, I enter without knocking. For days I live at 124. I become Sethe. Paul D. Denver. Amy Denver; Baby Suggs; Stamp Paid. The days are intense, difficult, exhausting, rewarding. I reach to understand. Stretching, straining, marveling, I perform Morrison’s world.

But Beloved also eludes me. Like Stamp Paid on the threshold of 124, I cannot enter. Parts of Morrison’s world won’t let me in. Especially Beloved herself and the narrative’s last two pages. Who, what is Beloved? Yes, Sethe’s murdered daughter. And—or? — a survivor of the Middle Passage. Labels, not understanding. And why the cryptic ending? Why move away from the intimate scene between Sethe and Paul D to declare “this was not a story to pass on”?

Another label for Beloved—from the litcrit drawer: oppositional character. Spiteful ghost, manipulating lover, selfish sister, all-consuming daughter. But also innocent—and representative—victim. Where is the integration—or the reason for no integration? A label for the ending: confrontational. But why this prose: “In the place where the long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away” (274)?

These questions, I see, are interconnected—answer one and other answers will follow—but something, someone blocks my way. Morrison? Me? My race? Gender? Something I have locked away in a tobacco tin inside my heart? Some other ignorance or insensitivity? All of these?

Oppositional character, confrontational ending indeed. There is a loneliness that reads.
Reading, Response, and Interpretation

Other critics of Beloved both relieve and exacerbate the loneliness, especially in relation to Beloved. In particular, Deborah Horvitz, Judith Wilt, Elizabeth House, Barbara Rigney, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, and Jean Wyatt offer excellent insights about Beloved, perceptions about her or her monologue that substantially advance my efforts to share Morrison's world. At the same time, their work paradoxically increases my loneliness because Beloved still seems to elude explanation and a gap remains between response and interpretation. Beloved is a survivor of the Middle Passage and of a white man found dead in his cabin around the time she shows up at 124 (House). She is both Sethe's murdered daughter and her murdered African mother (Wyatt), a specific character in a specific family and a representative of all the Middle Passage women (Rigney), “and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them” (Horvitz). She is a figure filled with the psychokinetic energy of the others who then use that energy to act out their needs and desires (Wilt). She is the incarnation of Sethe’s guilt (Rushdy). Because the novel supports—indeed, insists on—all these not entirely compatible accounts, it prevents us from resting with any one and makes the struggle to “perform” her part of Morrison’s world extraordinarily demanding. Moreover, adding the possibilities together gives us something less than the sum of the parts: Beloved dissolves into multiple fragments.

This gap between the experience of reading Beloved and the explanations offered by its interpreters is, in one respect, par for practical criticism’s course. Despite the significant work done in reader-response theory in the last twenty-five years, including such useful books as those by Iser, Flynn and Schweikart, Rabinowitz, Crosman, and Steig, most interpretive practice remains unaffected by this work, rarely taking its starting point from the critic’s response. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this general critical habit of separating the experience of reading from the act of interpretation occurs in Robert Scholes’s widely read Textual Power. Scholes proposes a progression from reading to interpretation to criticism but does not build the act of interpretation on the act of reading. For Scholes, to interpret is to
themmatize, and to themmatize is to divide the text into a series of repetitions and oppositions and to link these repetitions and oppositions to cultural codes. By locating the fundamental interpretive move in the division of the text into binary categories rather than in the identification of a sequence of responses, Scholes effects a divorce between reading and interpretation.³

I would like to take a closer look at the activities of reading and interpretation in order to explore further the relations and gaps between them and to highlight significant features of our conventional behavior as practical critics. To do standard academic interpretation (hereafter SAI) is to explain as coherently and comprehensively as possible the how and why of a text's signification. Because SAI has as its goal cognitive explanation, it involves a kind of translation. The text's language is viewed as that which is in need of explanation; the interpreter provides some other context and some other language—in effect, a code—to achieve that explanation.⁴ In SAI, the key move in developing the explanatory code is abstraction from the details of the text. My claim about the gap between reading and SAI is that academic interpreters typically do not attend to the multileveled act of reading when they perform this abstraction.

I hasten to add that I consider this situation neither a scandal nor a surprise. Because the numbers and kinds of possible translations are potentially infinite (though at any given juncture in the history of criticism only a finite number will be practiced),⁵ there is no necessary connection between reading and the endpoint of any one interpretation, and the last thing I want to do is to try to legislate one. Indeed, much of the current valuable work in cultural studies and the New Historicism depends on the interpreter doing such things as finding points of contact between literary and other cultural representations—activities that often appear unconnected to the interpreter's reading experience.⁶

Nevertheless, I believe that our conventional habits leave largely undeveloped one very rich kind of interpretive practice, one that I will call rhetorical reader-response. This practice follows from the position I sketched in the introduction and exemplified most fully in the essay "Sharing Secrets," which defines rhetorical reading as the recursive relationship between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and
reader response. Thus, it assumes that the text is a sharable medium of a multileveled communication between author and reader, even as it takes the reader’s experience of the text as the starting point for interpretation. Its effort is to link response to interpretation by seeking textual sources for individual responses, while also acknowledging that the construal of those textual sources is influenced by the reader’s subjectivity. In other words, in its way of linking reading to interpretation, rhetorical reader-response maintains both that the text constructs the reader and that the reader constructs the text, with the result that it does not believe that there is always a clear, sharply defined border between what is sharable and what is personal in reading and interpretation. Furthermore, even as the approach starts with response, it does not regard that response as something fixed beyond question but rather as something that may change and develop in the very effort to link reading and interpretation. All this helps clarify the claims I want to make for what follows: when I speak of the experience of reading *Beloved* here, I am referring to my experience. Nevertheless, I will try to focus on elements of my experience that I take to be not idiosyncratic but sharable. Moreover, in this essay I am not primarily concerned with trying to specify the boundary between textual and personal sources of experience. Instead, I want to explore further the typical gap between reading and SAI in order to reconsider SAI’s treatment of textual recalcitrance, a reconsideration that in turn will reveal the desires driving SAI. Finally, both explorations will have significant consequences for the claims I want to make about *Beloved* and about rhetorical reader-response criticism.

**The Difficult, the Stubborn, and Interpretive Desire**

One of the challenges and pleasures of interpretation is finding the “right translation,” uncovering a code that allows us to claim cognitive understanding of the text, to hear the “click” of the numerous signals of the text rearranging themselves into our new system of intelligibility. Virtually all texts, to one degree or another, present some obstacles to the interpreter, some material that initially seems resistant to whatever translation schema the interpreter is employing.
We academic interpreters naturally gravitate toward recalcitrant material, but we typically assume that all recalcitrance can yield to understanding, even if all that is finally revealed is the inevitability of recalcitrance. Indeed, this desire for and faith in explanation is the enabling assumption of some of our best criticism. But by always assuming that everything can be explained, we overlook the possibility that sometimes recalcitrance may not be overcome—that is, may not be overcome without some sacrifice of explanatory power. Saying that Beloved is this and this and this and that and that without attending to the difficulty of integrating all those identities explains Beloved in one way, but it does not explain what it is like to read and respond to her in the novel. Reading Beloved leads me to propose a distinction between two kinds of obstacles to understanding that result in two kinds of reading experience: The difficult is recalcitrance that yields to our explanatory efforts, while the stubborn is recalcitrance that will not yield.

The first chapter of Morrison’s narrative offers an encounter with the difficult. Morrison herself has offered a response-based account of her strategy, saying that she wanted her readers to experience “the compelling confusion of being there as they [the characters] are; suddenly, without comfort or succor from the ‘author,’ with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 33). Morrison’s technique does, indeed, induce a “compelling confusion,” one that envelops all the characters and even the setting. Questions about Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, the ghost, and Paul D, about their pasts, their presents, and their futures, pile up with each new sentence. Yet, with some work, including rereading, and some patience, this confusion yields to understanding, and we can see how Morrison uses this difficulty to influence our entrance into her “imaginative world.” In making us feel off-balance, she highlights many of that world’s particular ground rules, including some that not all of her readers will share: in this world, ghosts are not only present but taken for granted; in this world, the past coexists with the present.

As I’ve already suggested, I believe that Beloved herself is a paradigmatic case of the stubborn. Despite the best efforts of many careful readers, her character escapes any comprehensive, coherent account.
No matter how we arrange or rearrange the information about Beloved, there is always something that does not fit with the experience of everything else. We can solve the problem by following Deborah Ayer Sitter’s advice to “regard Beloved as a function rather than a person” (29), advice which in effect says “change your assumptions and your expectations; stop trying to read about a person here and recognize that you are reading about a synthetic construct that Morrison can maneuver as she sees fit.” But finally, following this advice seems to require neglecting the way Morrison cues us to read Beloved as both a function and a person. When we read, say, about Paul D’s encounter with her in the cold house, we experience him first struggling and then consenting not just to a function but also to a person—however enigmatic.

In the brief discussion of Beloved’s first chapter as an instance of the difficult, I followed Morrison’s lead and suggested some positive role, some functionality for that experience. I want to claim a similar functionality for the stubborn, a claim that highlights its paradoxical nature. On the one hand, I am identifying the stubborn as that which resists explanation; on the other, in claiming that it has a positive functionality, I am suggesting that it can yield to one kind of explanation, thereby apparently containing and confining it—and so collapsing it back into the difficult. I will say more about this paradox after trying to clarify the claim about functionality by distinguishing the stubborn and the difficult from a third kind of recalcitrance, one that lacks a positive functionality, the erroneous.

Again Beloved furnishes an example. Despite Morrison’s careful planning, she indicates in the first chapter two conflicting dates for the narrative’s present time action: 1873 and 1891. I see no way of resolving this conflict, and apart from specious generalizations about Morrison dramatizing the difficulty of reconstructing history, I cannot find any account of its functionality. The conflict is an instance of the erroneous, a small distraction (if noticed at all) that has no positive contribution to make and no functionality within Morrison’s narrative. By contrast, the stubborn is an experienced recalcitrance whose very resistance to explanation contributes significantly to the experience of the larger narrative. In other words, although it cannot be fully comprehended, we may be able to comprehend its effects. Indeed,
when the reader encounters the stubborn, the interpretive task shifts from explicating it to explaining the purpose of its recalcitrance.

Articulating the distinction between the difficult and the stubborn invites reflection on SLA’s underlying desire for mastery—and articulating the paradox of the stubborn invites similar reflection about the desire of a rhetorical reader-response criticism. Whatever we do with texts, however much we admire their power, and however much we pay lip service to their inexhaustibility, the act of interpretation rests upon a desire to make texts yield up their secrets, to take possession of them. This desire to possess, as I said above, often leads to brilliant interpretive insights, but it also blinds interpretation to its own hubris. Introducing the category of the stubborn into rhetorical reader-response makes possible a recognition of that hubris. The paradox of the stubborn, however, also allows for the repression of that recognition: if we get caught up in explaining the stubborn’s functionality, we can erase its elusiveness and turn its stubbornness into the Truth of the text, which we once again possess. Letting the stubborn remain stubborn means that we accept the possibility that “the struggle to interpret and perform” a sharable world is one we cannot entirely win. In this light, the paradox of the stubborn can be seen as its simultaneous effect of enriching that struggle and preventing it from being completely successful.12

**Encountering the Stubborn:**
**Reading/Interpreting Beloved**

*A baby ghost. A spiteful, venomous baby ghost. No, a “sad” ghost (8). Or a “lonely and rebuked” one (13)? Still, a powerful baby ghost, who can make the whole house pitch. A tired breathing.*

These multiple signifiers attach to her and haunt or brood over her later bodily incarnation(s).

*An innocent, needy twenty year old. In need of a mother. With no wrinkles. Who comes when Sethe’s water breaks. Who calls herself Beloved. Who has a scar on her neck. Who can’t walk but picks up a chair single-handed. Denver’s guess about her identity is also mine. But what does Beloved want? None of the previous associations seems exactly apt—she is not spite-
ful or venomous or powerful and, after a while, not tired.


Her appearance is disruptive—Sethe, Denver, and Paul were moving toward some harmony—and exciting. What mysteries does she contain?

Puzzling conversation with Denver. Cross-purpose communications?

“Why you call yourself Beloved?”
““In the dark my name is Beloved.”
““What’s it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?”
““Dark. . . I’m small in that place.”
. . . “Tell me, how did you get here?”
““I wait; then I got on the bridge. I stay there in the dark, in the daytime, in the dark, in the daytime. It was a long time.” (75)

Return from the underworld? Survival of Middle Passage? There is a difference, but what is it? As the mystery deepens, my attachment grows.

Return of the spiteful. Why strangle Sethe? Revenge? Seems more like jealousy: Sethe is thinking that she is glad to have Paul D. A warning delivered? So obscurely? But is she the strangler? She denies it when Denver asks her why, but she acts guilty. Still, she claims, “The circle of iron choked her.” OK, Sethe as slave. But Sethe never wore the literal iron. Is Beloved a seer then? A haunting, strangely frightening prophet.

The Ghost of Sex. Moving Paul D. Against his conscious will. Finally coming to him in the cold house. “You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name” (117). Motivation? Yes, separate Paul from Sethe. But there’s more. She wants him for herself. Why? To be Sethe’s rival? Electra? And why does she have power over Paul? Wilt says that Beloved acts out the other characters’ psychic needs; suggests Denver’s desire to separate Paul and Sethe, and Paul’s need to break the lock on his tobacco tin. Suggestive, but not finally satisfying. Beloved loses her identity in this view. Perhaps the sexual battle is the flip side of their battle when she was a ghost. And now she wins? But why can she break apart Paul’s tobacco tin when his loving Sethe hasn’t yet done that? Emotions mingle here: touched by her vulnerability, haunted by her power, scared and relieved for Paul.

More puzzles. Beloved knows one white man. Perhaps she is not the
crawling-already? baby returned. Beloved disappears when she accompa-
nies Denver to the cold house. *She must be a returned ghost*. Beloved
curls up in the dark and points to a face Denver can’t see—"her face,"
which is then "Me. It’s me" (124). *A Middle Passage ghost?* Beloved
"knows" that she could wake up and find herself in pieces. *More con-
flicting feelings: tenderness, fear, and always the mystery.*

Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is her daughter come back to
her.

Beloved never tells her story the way Denver tells hers or Sethe and
Paul D rememory theirs. And Morrison, who employs a remarkably
protean narrator, never offers an inside view of Beloved—until the
monologue. House and Horvitz each explicate its cryptic discourse
admirably. The central story it tells is that of a small girl and her
mother being forced to travel on a very crowded slave ship. The girl
keeps looking for her mother’s face, but she loses it when the mother
jumps into the sea. She is eventually put with a man who “hurts where
I sleep,” but she escapes from there and comes out of the blue water to
see "the face that left me"—Sethe’s (212, 213). As House says, the
monologue supports the view that what we have been reading is a
complicated case of mistaken identities. Beloved is not Denver’s sister
and Sethe’s daughter, but a survivor of the Middle Passage. And as
Morrison says, the desires of this independent survivor and those of
Sethe and Denver meet. Perhaps stubbornness is only difficulty.

*Doesn’t work.* *Why privilege the monologue over everything else?* Though
things like the white man get explained (or more accurately, now have
possible explanations), much is still left unexplained: the strangling,
the moving of Paul D, the disappearance. Furthermore, so much of
the experience of the previous twenty-one chapters depends on the
possibility that Beloved is Sethe’s daughter that transforming the stub-
bornness into difficulty denies the experience.

*Better to think of the monologue as a counter to the* *powerful responses to Beloved as sister and daughter in Denver’s and Sethe’s monologues. Monologue deepens stubbornness rather than transforms it. Now moved inside Beloved’s fear and confusion and pain—attachment and sympa-
thy increase even as the mystery does.*

The stubbornness persists as Beloved fades into the background and
Denver moves up front. *Who is this character draining Sethe of her life?* Rushdy says she is the incarnation of Sethe's guilt. *Makes good sense of some things—Sethe on a hopeless quest of expiation.* But Beloved-as-Guilt-Incarnate denies the experience of her monologue and simplifies the complex dynamics between Beloved, Sethe, and Denver. But her childlike selfishness complicates feelings further—understandable yet dangerous; I fear for Sethe, Beloved is too much with her. And me?

*The strange disappearance. How? Where? Is she pregnant?*

*Who is she in the last two pages?*

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**From Encounter to Formal Interpretation: The Ending of Beloved**

After concluding the penultimate chapter with an intimate scene of hope and reconciliation between Sethe and Paul D, the narrator suddenly swerves to a very different spatial, temporal, and emotional stance, one that puts considerable distance between that intimate scene and the concerns of the final two pages. In them, the narrator writes a kind of elegy for Beloved that also subtly calls attention to some larger claims that Morrison herself wants to make for her narrative. The effects of attending to Beloved as stubborn are inseparable from the development of these claims as we seek to interpret the difficulties of this chapter. After the opening paragraph, which effectively breaks the mood of the previous scene by discussing different kinds of loneliness (Sethe's loneliness that "can be rocked" and Paul D and Beloved's loneliness that "roams" [274]), the narrator turns her full attention to Beloved.

"Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?" (274).

These sentences complicate our relation to Beloved and to the larger narrative, because they emphasize her stubbornness and begin to introduce the paradox of the reading/writing situation as well as to split the awareness of the authorial and narrative audiences. The characters may forget Beloved, but we do not. Indeed, the narrator's
insistence on bringing her back into the narrative and calling her “disremembered” paradoxically emphasizes that she is not entirely forgotten, not entirely disremembered. We cannot, however, escape the assertion of the first sentence. And since we do not know her name, we do not know her origin—and do not, cannot fully know her. The two sentences together deepen the paradox of reading Beloved: unlike the others who knew her name, we do not dismember her by “disremembering” her, but we also do not really know this woman we are remembering.

The shift to the present tense in the second sentence further complicates the reading situation. On the very first page of the narrative, the narrator has made us aware that she and her audience are contemporaries, that we exist together in a present distant from the time of the action. “In fact,” she says, “Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years” (3). Only from a temporal vantage point of considerably later than 1873 would the narrator use that only. By employing the present tense here and not clearly indicating that it is the historical present, the narrator subtly includes her contemporary audience among those who are not looking for Beloved. But this very inclusion foregrounds the split between the narrative and the authorial audiences. As members of the narrative audience, we may at one level be among those who are not seeking Beloved, but at another level, by the very act of taking in the narrator’s words, we are seeking her and remembering her. As members of the authorial audience, we can initially exempt ourselves from any implication in the “disremembering” or the looking because we know that Beloved is a fictional character rather than a historical person. By using the narrator to call attention to the split between audiences, Morrison is beginning to move toward some larger claims about the kind of story she has been telling.

“Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where the long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away” (274).

Again the present tense signals our inclusion. Beloved has claim on our attention, our knowledge. But her stubbornness means that she cannot be contained by our knowledge. The first sentence also conveys an implied challenge to the authorial audience. Will we claim, if
not her reality, her story—with all its stubbornness? This question becomes more urgent as the narrator picks up numerous threads from Beloved's monologue—the long grass where Beloved first lost her African mother, her fear of breaking into pieces and being chewed and swallowed—and interweaves them in a metaphorical description of her erasure from history. As the narrator turns elegiac for Beloved here, Morrison also begins to draw upon the stubbornness of the character and the complex emotions the narrative has evoked to proliferate her signification and make a claim about her significance. The erasure of Beloved from history is the erasure of the small African child who lost her mother in the long grass, as well as the African American who feared she would fall apart when she lost her tooth, as well as all the slave women she comes to represent.

"It was not a story to pass on" (274).

The bald statement, after white space and with the vague "It," disrupts our reading because it is so apparently self-contradictory. Hasn't the narrator just "passed on" the story, and haven't we just spent an enormous amount of emotional energy reading it? Of course, one way to naturalize the sentence is to stay in the narrative audience and read it as the indirect discourse of Beloved's community, to interpret it as their response to her appearance and disappearance. But because the white space encourages our attributing the vision and voice of the sentence to the narrator, we become aware of additional readings, even in the narrative audience. "It was not a story to pass on" and "it was not a story to pass on"—in the sense of "to pass by"—but it was something else, a reality to be confronted. Sethe and Denver were not able to read the story of Beloved's possible other identity. Beloved was never able to recognize the difference of Sethe's story from her African mother's. Only we have seen the irreconcilable stories and the character who cannot be contained by either; only we have felt the full range of emotions generated by her narrative. Will we adopt the attitude expressed in the indirect discourse and find the stubbornness of Beloved's character a reason not to pass on her story? Or will we accept the challenge of confronting its multiple, stubbornly shifting realities?

There is yet another layer here, one that we may see more clearly in the light of both the paradox of stubbornness and the underlying desire of interpretation for mastery. In focusing so far on the productive
functionality of Beloved's stubbornness, I have in a sense been making that stubbornness the key to the ending—and by extension to Morrison's narrative. I have, in other words, been turning the stubborn into the difficult—and exhibiting once again the power of interpretation's desire for mastery and possession. But even as "It was not a story to pass on" challenges the authorial audience to confront the multiple realities of Beloved, it also challenges our ability to share those realities. More particularly, I must ask how much I, as a privileged white male reader, see and fail to see, share and fail to share in Morrison's vision of the horrors of the Middle Passage, of slavery, of the intensity and desperation of Sethe's mother love—and that of Margaret Garner, the historical figure upon whom Sethe's story is based. To presume mastery here is to move beyond hubris.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. . . .

It was not a story to pass on. (274–75)

Morrison continues to implicate her audience in the narrator's statements and to press her challenge about what we will do with our reading of Beloved's story. Beloved is a painful memory even for those who knew her, because she reminds everyone of the depths of pain they endured in slavery. A white reader like myself may try to escape the pain—and any responsibility—by confessing, as I just did, the limits of his understanding. But this passage blocks that move. In reading this narrative, we—white readers, black readers, all readers—have, in a sense, lived with Beloved. Will we forget her because it is unwise to remember, unwise because remembering may entail some responsibility to her memory? At this juncture, the repetition of "It was not a story to pass on" continues the challenge in the same vein: to pass on this story is to be unwise because the story is too disturbing and too
unsetting, has depths of pain that may never be plumbed. The implication about the cowardice of turning one’s back is clear.

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. . . . They can touch it [an old photograph] if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do.

This is not a story to pass on. (275)

The ending takes a significant turn at “however.” They may forget/repress—we may forget/repress—but Beloved is not thereby erased from history. She lives on in some way. Furthermore, once we acknowledge her presence in history, “things will never be the same.” By having the narrator shift from “It was” to “This is” not a story to pass on, Morrison addresses the authorial audience most directly. Furthermore, the sentence is now loaded with almost as many meanings as Beloved, and it has its force precisely because Beloved has been so loaded with meanings. This is not just a story to tell for amusement; this is not a story to pass by; this is not a story to tell lightly, because once you tell it things will never be the same. But this is also not a story that you will ever fully comprehend.

At this point, then, Morrison has gradually built up to some very significant claims for Beloved. Morrison has transformed the historical event that provided the germ of the narrative, Margaret Garner’s killing her child in 1855 and expressing serenity afterwards, into an emotionally powerful fiction. In this conclusion, however, she is challenging us to treat the narrative as a species of history. In insisting on Beloved’s enduring presence and the power of her story, Morrison is drawing upon the representative quality of all the possibilities that Beloved has come to stand for and be associated with: all the daughters and all the families whose lives were twisted by “the men without skin”; all those who lived under slavery, and who lived with its legacy even after it was outlawed; indeed, the “sixty million and more” who died on the slave ships and to whom Morrison dedicates the book. At the same time, by concentrating the power of all these possibilities
within the single character, Morrison points to the depths of each: we can name the multiplicity, but we cannot claim to know it in the sense of mastering it.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

Beloved. (275)

These last two segments of the narrative complete it in an appropriately powerful way. Remaining in the present tense, the narrator details the final disappearance of Beloved, and then employs the negatives to suggest her ineradicable presence beneath all denials of her. More than that, the negatives suggest her need to “be loved.” Then finally, the narrator utters her name. The functions of this signifier are now manifold. In the immediate context, “Beloved” signals the return of the repressed. Not just ineradicably there underneath our history, she—and all those she stands for—are now produced for our contemplation and are what this narrative leaves us with. Unable to do justice to all the complex realities signified by “Beloved,” we nevertheless end our reading by attending to them. Moreover, this narrative, which takes its title from this word, stands as testimony to the presence and the complexity of those realities.

At the same time, the word breaks the pattern of repetitions. “It was not a story to pass on.” “It was not a story to pass on.” “This is not a story to pass on.” “Beloved.” The eruption of the word itself exemplifies the point: not a story to pass on, but a person whose multiplicity transcends any story that can be told about her. And here the importance of the fiction comes back: her story stands in for the millions and millions of other slaves, whose lives and deaths, though not passed on in story, are just as deep, just as emotionally wrenching, just as important and just as stubborn as hers.

The pattern also makes “Beloved” available to be read not just as the narrator’s final word but also as Morrison’s final address to her readers. Just as the preacher at Beloved’s funeral began by addressing his audience, “Dearly beloved,” so Morrison ends by addressing us as
“Beloved.” The intratextual link makes it a gesture of affection and a reminder of the challenge: we are beloved, not yet Dearly Beloved. This reminder of the character’s naming effectively blocks any impulse to romanticize the character even as we keep her story alive: the reminder calls back what Sethe did to get the name on the tombstone, and, indeed, it calls back the knowledge that “Beloved” is the tombstone marker itself. Furthermore, this reminder once again blocks any impulse to master the stubbornness of her character by pointing to the gaps that keep her from yielding to our understanding and then by extension to all the history that we have lost, especially to that of the sixty million and more whose names we do not know. “Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name” (274).

**Recursiveness and the Limits of Interpretation**

Beloved still eludes me, but I feel that I see more of her. I still cannot—and do not want to—transform Beloved’s stubbornness into a difficulty to solve, but I comprehend some of the reasons for that stubbornness. Furthermore, just as the effort to attend to the stubborn has helped root interpretation in the experience of reading, so too has interpretation allowed for a clarification, an enrichment of that reading experience. Within this rhetorical reader-response approach, reading and interpretation, like thinking and writing, can be endlessly recursive, each one opening up the possibility of revision in what the other has just done.

Perhaps more significantly, the stubborn helps reveal the limitations of interpretation’s desire for mastery, helps remind us that the effort to perform an author’s world does not always have to result in a virtuoso performance for the interpretation to be valuable and enlightening. In the spirit of that recognition, I offer the conclusions of this essay not as fixed, frozen, and beyond question but as working hypotheses about complex matters. To claim any more would be to exhibit a decidedly unproductive personal stubbornness.