

Écriture Féminine
A Reading of Toni Morrison's
Beloved

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Introduction

“Women must put herself into the text-
as into the world and into history-
by her own movement”

Hélène Cixous, 1976

The most essential elements of the here developed reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as *écriture féminine* are present in this quote by Hélène Cixous: “Women”, “text”, “world”, “history”, “her movement”¹. Women in literature, if present, are often represented, instead of representing themselves. The focus that this thesis employs lies on the relevance of *Beloved* as a ‘feminine’ text. The concept of a feminine text might be confused with so-called women’s books. Yet the relevance of this text as being feminine can be seen as rejecting exactly those books. A feminine text challenges and aims to undo some of the fallacious attitudes towards and about women and their sexuality in Western culture, language and history. French feminists in the 1960s developed a critical literary theory which outlines these attitudes and which can be used as a tool to undo them. It is referred to as *écriture féminine*, which can be translated as: women’s writing. Works by French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva examine the domains of women’s writing from their own specific disciplines. Using a literary approach, namely a close reading which focuses on details, passages and features in the novel, I aim to show that *Beloved* by Toni Morrison can be read as *écriture féminine*. However, before exploring the grounds on which the novel meets the literary theory, it is important to situate both the novel and *écriture féminine*.

In *Beloved*, women’s representation in history plays an important role. The book concerns itself with the African-American population in The United States of America in the post-Civil War years. This armed conflict between the North and the South officially lasted from 1861 until 1865, but the effects of the war continued to ripple through history long after peace was established. During the years leading up to the war as well as during the war itself, numerous atrocities occurred against African-American men and women who were brought in

¹ “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous 1976: 875.

as slaves. Abolitionist movements began to appear as the war raged on, advocating a strong counter-discourse, calling for the end of slavery. It was also during this time that slave-narratives were published in order to create more awareness. These narratives were political and argumentative representations of the experiences of slaves. A few months after the Civil War ended in 1865 the government adopted the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which officially abolished the practice of slavery. Regardless of the amendment, plantation owners sought to keep the conditions of the African Americans poor, undereducated and Other. The struggle against discrimination and racism, violence and injustice continued². Morrison concerns herself with writing women and their experience into American history with her novels. She writes especially about African-American women because their fight was on a multitude of fronts, of which many are underrepresented. In the foreword of the novel Morrison explains that this is due to the fact that black women's history differs from that of their white American counterparts and gives an example regarding matrimony and parenthood. "Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal" (Morrison 2007: 11). Having children was practically mandatory, raising them was out of the question (ibid.) It is from this historical background that Toni Morrison writes the novel *Beloved*. *Beloved* was the fifth novel she wrote, first published in 1987. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 1988 and The American Book Award and was adapted into a major motion picture in 1998.

A body of French feminists, thirty years earlier, noticed the same mis-and-underrepresentation of women as Morrison. According to them, Western thought was constructed on the structural absence of women's experiences. These scholars were previously involved with structuralism and can be seen as instigating what is known today as post structuralism and postmodernism. They called for a reevaluation of society. From a standpoint that speaks for the existence of a female discourse, they produced work that aimed to show and deconstruct existing structures in language, history, psychoanalysis, philosophy and other disciplines. Such a standpoint can be referred to as critical theory. Two important elements can be identified in this French critical theory. According to Ann Rosalind Jones in her essay "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Écriture féminine" French écriture féminine calls for a new representation of the consciousness of women and it gives a critique on material and ideological forms of phallogentrism (247). It is important to note that both Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, two important scholars in écriture féminine, do not

² See *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* by David W. Blight for more information on (the aftermath of) the Civil War and the position of African-American people within existing historical discourses.

classify their work as predominantly feminist. Both write first and foremost from their backgrounds in other disciplines, which is often forgotten and their work therefore is consequently misinterpreted. Similarly, Toni Morrison also aims to avoid being categorized.

The novel *Beloved* is an homage to the experiences of enslaved African women, their memories and their underrepresented voice in history. However, Morrison also does not label it as a feminist work. In an interview conducted on February 2 1998 by Zia Jaffrey Toni Morrison explains why: “I don’t subscribe to patriarchy, and I don’t think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it’s a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things.” She writes in order to break open the existing discourse, such as the political inclined slave narratives and shines new light on it. The use of a new bodily type of discourse is inevitable. “To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way” (Morrison 2007: 13). Additionally, Morrison does not want to be labeled as feminist but she firmly believes in what she calls women’s fiction. This category is open and its borders are fluid, there is no set definition as to which works can be categorized as such. How it is read, reviewed, understood and the response from society when it is confronted with something such as (black) women’s literature interests Morrison greatly. She writes to establish a revaluation of society and to open up discourse on many different, difficult subjects. The firm belief in a female voice is where Morrison as well as the French feminists began their deconstruction and rewriting of history, philosophy, reformation of language and social structures in Western thought and culture. From this perspective I read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison as *écriture féminine*.

In terms of set-up, this introduction will be followed by a short chapter on the methodological approach that will be used throughout the thesis. After which the first part will regard three fundamentally important elements of *écriture féminine*. Since women’s writing is essentially the central focus point, language is the first concept that will be looked at. It has an umbrella function with regards to the two other themes, being sexuality, love and the body, and the maternal. The second part consists of a close reading of *Beloved* which will follow the same structure as part one. The thesis will end with a conclusion and a list of cited works.

Methodological approach

Écriture Féminine, A Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The title of this bachelor thesis already indicates its focus. It is a topic that combines two disciplines: literary studies and feminist theory. More specifically, this thesis combines the American novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and the French feminist literary theory *écriture féminine*. *Beloved* can be tied to a broad variety of ongoing issues and debates. For the purpose of this thesis the novel will be subjected to a close reading that concentrates on those aspects that are relevant in connection to *écriture féminine*. The close reading will include an analysis of several passages of the novel's text. The passages will be selected based on their literary, linguistic and historical features. Short excerpts from the novel will be interpreted in the light of French feminist *écriture féminine* and will hold appropriate terminology to further indicate the connection between the theory and the novel. The conclusions will be linked to themes established in the chapter about *écriture féminine*. These themes include: language, the body, love and sexuality, and the maternal.

The terminology of *écriture féminine* was first introduced by Hélène Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976). It is also connected to critical theorists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Both authors add different dimensions to the concept due to the fact that they are writing from different disciplines. Where Irigaray is writing with a background in philosophy, Kristeva connects semiology and psychoanalysis to the method of *écriture féminine*. By analyzing their work in the previously mentioned framework I will show that *écriture féminine* can be read as a method of writing that is also used by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*.

The analysis will be constructed according to the previously mentioned relevant dimensions, holding passages of text from the novel itself as well as supporting passages from work by critical theorists and feminists. Several questions will act as guidelines. What is *écriture féminine*? What are the connections between the novel and *écriture féminine*? Where can *écriture féminine* be found in *Beloved*? By asking these questions I will reason for the interpretation of *Beloved* as a feminine text, as *écriture féminine*. It is important for women to speak for themselves, about their experience, their sexuality. It is important to leave the sensitive, fragile, dreamy woman, if she is present at all, in literary works of the past. It is also important to recognize and shed the "anti-love" (Cixous 1976: 878) that women have been placed in. I will speak about women's writing: about what it can be.

Écriture Féminine

Écriture féminine, which translated into English means: women's writing or feminine writing, is a literary theory with many different facets. Hélène Cixous, French poststructuralist, feminist, and writer is the first to point out that a definition cannot easily be constructed. Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) coined the concept which aims to dislocate existing concepts of femininity in Western thought and discourse. Consequently, there are many aspects to it that are easily misinterpreted. In the essay Cixous begins by setting up a framework to avoid possible misinterpretations. The terms feminine and masculine are, in Western society, easily linked to an essentialist opposition of female versus male. Cixous stresses that the symbolic feminine and masculine are not limited to gender. Additionally they do not denote a universal essence but have to be read as constructs of historical nature. "[...] you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes- any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another" (Cixous 1976: 876). As the quote illustrates Cixous does not claim to have one blueprint applicable to all women, ruling out all diversity. She rather believes in a shared common ground that she wishes to explore (Cixous 1976: 876). A variety of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, the poetic, fiction and critical theory appear in her writing. Additionally, work by Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray will appear in this thesis. Kristeva writes from the semiotic and psychoanalytical field and Irigaray from the field of philosophy. Together with Cixous her literary background this will make for an interdisciplinary representation of écriture féminine. Their work will be categorized according to three themes. First there is a focus on language, beginning with its importance in historical constructs and its gendered nature in existing discourses in Western society. Finally language and its use as a tool in order to establish change is highlighted. Tying into this is the feminine body and the plane of feminine sexuality. The structural absence of female drives and desires from Western literature is highlighted. This can be linked to the mis-and-under-representation of one of the aspects of femininity, namely, motherhood and the maternal. By close reading primary as well as secondary literature through these three focus points, the questions of what écriture féminine is and what it can do as a method, will be answered here.

Language

The importance of language can be seen in the establishment of the dominant discourses in Western society. Cixous argues for “marked writing” (Cixous 1976: 879) where writing is the product of a libidinal, political and thus masculine economy. The concept of, consequently, gendered writing has been established gradually throughout history. Verena Andermatt Conley in her book *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* shows how Cixous uses the familiar structures of binary oppositions in Western culture to underline this argument (Conley 1984: 56). Bodies in society have been categorized accordingly, proof of which can be found in literature (ibid). According to Conley this creates a serious social problem, namely, the division of bodies as either male or female: “The ordering of values (with their connotations of presence and substance) are accompanied by moral values, good or bad” (ibid.). Women were considered the opposites of men and also the psychically weaker sex, thus establishing sexual difference. However, according to Cixous, the power of language can be harnessed and used to dislocate the established binary oppositions. By writing women back into those discourses, representing them correctly, language can be used to establish change on a multitude of grounds. For the purpose of looking at this issue in an interdisciplinary way I will now move away from the literary field to psychoanalysis and philosophy. Bulgarian-French feminist Julia Kristeva’s line of thought originates in psychoanalysis and semiology. Kristeva doubts if women should want to challenge the existing order by creating a new discourse³. She believes that women are able to oppose the existing concepts of Western thought within the masculine systems of language. In her essay “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of “L’Ecriture feminine” (1981) Ann Rosalind Jones explains Kristeva’s views:

“Rather than formulating a new discourse, women should persist in challenging the discourses that stand. [...] In fact, “women” to Kristeva represents not so much a sex as an attitude, any resistance to conventional culture and language.” (Jones 1981: 249)

Kristeva does not opt for a new position from the outside but for a position that rejects from within the phallogocentric system. In *Jaques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* Elizabeth Grosz explains this further:

“Her [Kristeva’s] aim seems to be the exploration of a new theoretical space and language which may be able to undermine patriarchal and phallogocentric domination of

³ See *New French Feminisms An Anthology* ed. Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron (165-167) for more information regarding Kristeva’s view on women’s writing.

the sphere of representations and, more positively, to provide a mode of representation for women as women.” (Grosz 1990: 169)

As illustrated by the quote above, Kristeva acknowledges the lack of the representation of women within the dominant language system. Belgian-French feminist Luce Irigaray further explores in her essay “When Our Lips Speak Together” (1980) the problematic interplay between the sexes: “If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story” (69).

Irigaray aims to show that there is a need for a feminine language but at the same time the need to establish a completely new relation between the sexes where neither one submits. Two sexes, two bodies, two types of desire, at least. In the interview “Je-Luce Irigaray”: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray” conducted by Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson Irigaray states that her work should foremost be read as philosophical. This is important because her work incorporates the linguistic field, psychoanalysis, psychology and literary studies as well. She categorizes her work in three phases:

“[...] the first a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the Western subject; the second, how to define a second subject and the third phase, how to define a relationship, a philosophy, an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects” (Irigaray 344)⁴.

Irigaray’s work is structured very clearly towards the development of a middle ground where the two, or more, subjects are equal. Where Kristeva’s argument stems from psychoanalysis and semiology, Irigaray’s argument is mostly philosophical and Cixous remains the literary field. As argued above, their focus lies on different aspects of language. Kristeva argues women are in the position to reject systems of language from within. Irigaray works towards a coexistence of subjects. Cixous argues for “marked writing” (Cixous 1976: 879) and looks to define the characteristics of feminine language.

In order to make clear that there is a difference between masculine writing and feminine writing, Cixous stresses the importance of structures of the past. Throughout history female and occasionally male authors have produced literary works where femininity has been inscribed but only very sparsely. This is due to the fact that female writers writing in the existing constructs would hold onto the male representation of women as soft, sensitive and so on; or would even obscure her (Cixous). Women’s writing has a poetic quality itself. It would be just like her sexuality: “Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or

⁴ For a more inclusive image of Irigaray’s work and the three phases see “Luce Irigaray’s Critique of Rationality” (109-130) by Margaret Whitford in *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*.

discerning contours” (889). A bodily rhythm will be visible in her language. Cixous herself shows this quality in her work: she leaves out, skips from one to the next, uses italics, bolds, makes her work poetic. Conley interprets the poetic function in Cixous in the following way: “Writing poetically, she can disregard the constraints of theory. She infuses her texts with theory but without enclosing herself in what she calls “its limits” (Conley 1984: 105). She utilizes the poetic to underline her points. Language is essential to the concept of *écriture féminine*. Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous have analyzed its functions regarding the symbolic masculine and feminine. Cixous opts for a feminine discourse, Kristeva aims to undo structures in language from within and Irigaray shows how two types of subjects in language could coexist. Cixous comes from a literary approach and gives the characteristic of the poetic to feminine language. In *Beloved*, the novel central to this thesis, the established masculine discourse is opened up and the female characters’ experience is written into it. This includes the use of literary devices such as metaphors, multiple narratives and the poetic in order to show femininity. This will be analyzed in more detail further along in the thesis.

Sexuality, Love and Desire

According to Cixous not enough is known and written by women about feminine sexuality, love and desire in classic literary history. The inscribing of these experiences in and through language is central to the concept of *écriture féminine*. “The Laugh of the Medusa” was written in 1975 and translated to English in 1976. The Social Revolution in Paris, France, that occurred in 1968, a few years before the publication of “The Laugh of the Medusa”, was important to Hélène Cixous and key to her work. According to Verena Andermatt Conley Cixous strongly believed in the events of 1968 and called to women:

“[...] to imagine simultaneously a general change in structures of education, training, reproduction, and a real liberation of sexuality: that is to say, a transformation of the relationship of each to her (and his) body and to the other body.” (Conley 1984: 58-59)

This call for change is also echoed in the essay “When Our Lips Speak Together” by Luce Irigaray, who shows how women are trapped in phallogentric Western thought by the mis- and underrepresentation of their bodies and sexualities. According to Jones, Irigaray takes feminine sexuality as a starting point for a feminine self-consciousness. Women’s sexuality cannot be expressed or understood within existing phallogentric discourse (Jones 1981: 250). The female sexual pleasures are trapped in a system of language that flattens and simplifies its depth. Desires are secret. This she connects to the fact that women are afraid to speak. “If you wish to speak “well” you constrict yourself, become narrower as you rise. Stretching, reaching higher, you leave behind the limitless realm of your body” (Irigaray 1980: 75-76). A system of language that has space to incorporate the depth of female sexuality is needed. Julia Kristeva has perhaps the most to say about the dimension of sexuality in women’s struggle. She makes use of texts by psychoanalysts such as Lacan. Elizabeth Grosz takes a look at Kristeva’s complex position regarding the issue of sexuality and women’s writing. Kristeva places much emphasis on semiotics in order to explain the realm of sexuality. “The semiotic is the order of the sexual drives and their articulation. It provides the matter, the impetus, and the subversive potential of all signification” (Grosz 1990: 150). Kristeva argues that the semiotic is repressed in dominant language structures symbolically, grammatical and syntactically (152).

“Her interrogation of philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses, seeking their flaws and ‘blindspots’, her use of these paradigms against themselves is directed towards concrete political goals: the positive reinscription of women’s bodies, the positive

reconstruction of female morphologies and thus the creation of perspectives, positions, desires that are inhabitable by women as women.” (169)

Through her argumentative structure the political element of feminine sexuality and *écriture féminine* is put forward by Kristeva very clearly. *Écriture féminine* engage critically with existing structures, involving the political, the feminine, sexuality, the body and semiotics. *Beloved* is constructed as an extension of this theory. It leaves the realms of theory behind and moves to the representation itself. In the narratives of the women in *Beloved* sexuality, love and desire are of the most importance and related to almost every aspect of their lives. Further analysis will show how the dimensions of the novel meet the theory as outlined by Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray.

The Maternal

The concept of the maternal can be explained as that which is linked to motherhood or the mother. In *écriture féminine* the maternal also has a metaphoric role. Cixous defines it as: “that force which produces/ is produced by the other” (Cixous 1976, 881). It crops up in the works of Cixous but also in those by Kristeva and Irigaray. All three women examine the concept from their own associate disciplines. Their analysis starts by looking at existing structures. And just as Kristeva sees no merit in creating a feminine discourse she also does not connect the maternal explicitly to the female subject. According to Elizabeth Grosz:

“On her [Kristeva’s] model, maternity is a process unregulated to any subject, especially not by a female subject. The subject of maternity exists no-where. Becoming a mother is both the culmination of femininity and the abnegation and denial of any female identity [...]” (Grosz 1980: 237).

Grosz explains further how Kristeva argues that the female subject stops existing at the moment when a woman becomes a mother (ibid.). There is no in-between subject and thus maternity cannot be placed. This notion can be connected to the ideas of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Irigaray explores the maternal from the Freudian Oedipus complex. Looking from the perspective of a child Irigaray deduces the same as Kristeva, the female subject, or sex, is not compatible with maternity. Growing up, a child will construct an image in which the male and the female are not equal.

“[...] in our culture, the child, boy or girl, does not have an adequate representation of the *two* sexes. It is confronted with the male sex, and, given the woman’s submersion in maternity, with a mother. There is no representation of the female sex” (Grosz 1990: 180).

The identity of a woman is composed of maternity on the one hand and the object of desire on the other (181). Pregnant women are hovering in a symbolic no-where. In order to deconstruct the uneven balance of the maternal, Irigaray comes back to her argument of establishing new relations between subjects. She moves away from the male and female subject to focus on that of the child. Between the mother and the daughter especially, a way to communicate their identities is needed. For both the mother and the daughter it is vital that they develop this dimension in order for the young girl to become a female subject and for the mother to retain her subjectivity. Cixous links maternity to desire similarly but without incorporating psychoanalysis. Women who do not desire to become mothers are regarded with suspicion.

To have a child, to not have a child, is a personal choice. Cixous addresses the complex social background of the concept:

“Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive-all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive -just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away-or cursed-in the classic texts ” (Cixous 1976, 891).

Cixous brings the maternal back to the female desires and drives. Together with Kristeva and Irigaray’s ideas it becomes an optional expression of femininity, instead of a way to define women as mothers. Maternity becomes an expression of the self.

As shown above *écriture féminine* as a method is often utilized to open up existing concepts such as the maternal and female sexuality. It aims to incorporate accurate representations of women and their experiences in existing social constructs. Toni Morrison aims to deconstruct existing social structures within American history and more specifically, the history of African-American women. In the novel the experiences of female characters are central to the story exactly because they have been so absent in mainstream historical discourse. Sexuality, love and desire are tied to female experience and are examined most in relation to slavery. The language that is used in the book does not follow masculine structures but has a feminine quality as it incorporates their sexuality, their bodies, their hurts and their desires. The main theme in the novel *Beloved* is family, hinging entirely on the maternal and expressions of subjectivity within that structure. There is no explicit concept of *écriture féminine* according to Cixous but perhaps it can be understood as a method or a tool which aims to create a space for women by writing the woman.

Analysis: *Beloved* as Écriture Féminine

“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? (Morrison 2007, 323). The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison portrays African-American people within the American society in a post-civil-war setting. The quote with which I begin my reading of this novel already implies a great deal of misrepresentation, underrepresentation and a general feeling of being lost. The novel in general examines the morals and values that are ascribed and denied to African-American slaves. By providing a multitude of narrators she actually breaks open existing constructs, such as for example the slave narratives. The story is told mainly through the experience of the enslaved women and it builds around one main theme: family. This theme incorporates many facets. The lack of a parental figure had profound influence on the lives of slave children and the difficulty of the construction of the self is embodied in several characters. Representation of the self as a subject rather than an object is a struggle throughout the novel. This struggle can be linked very closely to Hélène Cixous and écriture féminine, as my further analysis of the characters will show. The form of the novel meets its content. It is constructed on personal accounts of enslaved African people and thus, the narrative is not linear but circular. According to Hélène Cixous this circularity is essentially linked to the speech of women: “Her speech, even when “theoretical” or political, is never simple or linear or “objectified,” generalized: she draws her story into history” (1976: 881). Morrison creates a feminine discourse by using personal as well as national history, metaphors as vehicles to link the themes to the narrators and by incorporating gaps, puns, silences, and empty spaces. It has the poetic characteristics of the female subject of which Cixous speaks. Not only the form and language of the novel are important. This thesis will focus on the two previously explored dimensions of sexuality and the maternal. Within the constructs of a slave holding society concepts such as sexuality, love and desire changed. This is due to the fact that many aspects of it, such as the maternal, were denied to enslaved African-American people. By doing a close reading of the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, examining the concepts of language but also the female body, sexuality, love and the maternal, this text will be identified as écriture féminine.

Language

Language is Toni Morrison's most important tool. In *Beloved* she makes use of several literary devices such as metaphors, theme and narration to make up the balance between content and form. In her essay "Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" (1995) Kristin Boudreau speaks about how the novel is able to open up existing constructs such as the slave narrative. She argues that the novel cannot be linked simply to slave narratives because slave narratives present reasoned arguments in favor of the abolition of slavery, where Morrison's characters are not put in ordered narrative (453). "Their language, their reasoning powers, even their sense of self have been dismantled by the process of torture" (ibid.). Consequently, their language is infused with meaning on different levels. Bodily discourses manifests itself, holding the collective memory and history of enslaved African-American people as well as personal history.

Toni Morrison makes use of a discourse that speaks more accurately of women's experiences. She makes use of gaps, puns, silences and empty spaces. This makes her writing appear almost poetic. An example is the passage in which starts with "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison 2007: 248). Several voices mix, the narration shifts, there are silences and empty spaces, punctuation is missing and used differently. There is almost an ebb and flow visible in her words. "She said you wouldn't hurt me. She hurt me. I will protect you. I want her face. Don't love her too much. I am loving her too much" (255). This is the sea, the fluidness of the female discourse of which Cixous speaks. She claims this sea is undoubtedly connected to the feminine sexuality. "Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours [...]" (Cixous 1976: 889). In line with Cixous Morrison makes use of language without discerning contours.

Instead of a linear approach, circularity and circle metaphors dominate *Beloved*. This can be related back to the fluid nature of feminine writing as proposed by Cixous. The story has no beginning and no end and works with a parallel between the past at Sweet Home plantation and the present at the Bluestone Road house. The novel portrays circularity for example through relationships between characters. The characters of Paul D and Sethe are such an example. Sethe, the protagonist of the story, is a woman who cannot shake the remnants of her violent past at the Sweet Home plantation. She uses motherhood in order to reconcile with it. The main dilemma surrounding Sethe is that out of an act of motherly love she attempts to murder her children in order to protect them from the institution of slavery. At

one point Sethe is talking to Paul D, one of the fellow slaves at Sweet Home. When he visits her many years later, at her new house on Bluestone Road, they become lovers. In the excerpt below Sethe is trying to talk to him about why and what she has done in order to protect her children. Language does not seem to be capable of expressing the depth and fluidity of her drive for motherhood. There is no linear explanation and consequently, Sethe's language moves in circles.

“Sethe knew that the circle that she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off- she could never explain” (Morrison 2007: 192).

Sethe stresses here her inability to pin down what drove her to this action. Paul D is not able to follow Sethe's circular explanation and accuses her of having “too thick” love (193). This comment is not entirely misplaced because Sethe's action comes forth from a difficult combination of love and guilt. In his essay “Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*” (1992) Philip Page recognized more of such subtle circular imagery in *Beloved*. For example, on the level of literary devices there is Denver's circular bower. On a textual level it functions as a safe haven for her and on a symbolic level its circular nature can be read referring to the womb. This can be connected to her fascination for the story of her birth, says Page, and her paralyzing infantilism (34). Denver is kept at home, never leaving the house or seeing any other people. Her condition does not change until she is eventually symbolically ‘birthed’ when she claims her subjectivity near the end of the novel by becoming an active member of the community. Another metaphorical circular image can be recognized in the scene in which Sethe is sitting in a clearing and suddenly feels strange ghost hands circling her neck. When at first they feel soothing they soon start to strangle her. After this occurs *Beloved* comes to massage her neck. Denver accuses her of being the one who tried to strangle Sethe.

“I fixed it, didn't I? Didn't I fix her neck?”

“After. After you choked her neck.”

“I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it.” (Morrison 2007: 119)

Hands on the neck can be either soothing or strangling, loving or murderous (Page 1992: 34). Page further explores the image from this passage in a larger context: “[...] a circle can be destructive or constructive, confining or fulfilling (ibid.). The metaphorical depth of this image lies in its duality: the fact that *Beloved* is also referring to the collective past by mentioning the circle of iron. This circle of iron is referring to the slave collar that enslaved people had to wear. Zooming in on the subtle imagery connected to circularity, it is

represented in the imagery, metaphors and language used by Morrison. Circularity can also be recognized in terms of narrative.

Circularity with regards to narrative can be found in the fact that major events happen twice according to the parallel between the past and the present. Schoolteacher who visits the house in order to recapture Sethe and her children in the past and Mr. Bodewin arriving for Denver in the present. Both scenes inspire the same response from Sethe: terror and violence. Another dimension is evident in how the mother function in the family passes from Baby Suggs to Sethe and eventually to her daughter Denver. Page also identifies African folklore in *Beloved*. “The principle narrative strategy of the novel is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, veer away into other matters, then circle back with more information about the initial fact, then veer away again, circle back again, and so on” (1992: 35). The fact that Morrison incorporates this technique relatable to African folklore is important. It does not only fit the concept of circularity but Morrison also embeds her female characters in several layers of history and culture. This echoes with Cixous and “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Here Cixous states that: “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (882). The word Sethe uses to denote this layering is: rememory.

“[...] if the past can never cease to exist, the memory always lives, as well as the fear of the reality of that past. Curiously, Sethe’s word for this phenomenon is rememory, a combination of memory and remember- which itself doubles the process. For her, memory is both an actual repetition of real events and a repetition of a memory, a re-memory, a circling back in one’s mind to what was previously there both in reality and in its recall.”(Page 1992: 37).

Sethe believes that once something has occurred, it does not cease to exist but is always there, no matter if it is personally experienced or not (ibid.). This is also shown in the way Morrison mixes the narratives of the minor and major characters with the collective memory. The best example of rememory is the story of Denver’s birth. It is not told by those who were actually present such as Sethe or Amy Denver but instead it is told by Beloved and Denver herself.

“Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it: the quality of Amy’s voice, her breath like burning wood.” (Morrison 2007: 92)

There are two dimensions at work. The girls can recreate the story within Sethe’s concept of rememory, the memories are collective and thus the events are still in place which grants them

access. The second dimension, according to Page, is that of the recreation of the novel: “[...] Morrison’s imagining, her doing the best she can to create what really happened, what historical documents- such as slave narratives- say and don’t say” (Page 1992: 38). Through the concept of rememory Morrison shows how the women in her novel blend personal history with national history and even world history.

Circularity, which is linked to female sexuality by Cixous, is very visible in *Beloved*. The fluidity that Cixous connects to the female sexuality can be found in Morrison’s use of language as well. In the passages in which Beloved is speaking, embodying personal as well as the collective past, Morrison blends words, punctuation and narrative together. Examples of a more subtle use include circular relationships, for example between Sethe and Paul D and use of metaphors such as Denver’s circular bower which represents a womb and from which she will eventually emerge to step into the community. Additionally, circularity is linked to history in the scene with the choking hands, which symbolically represent the slave collars. Lastly, the narrative structure can be linked to African folklore. This implies the large circle of history that is incorporated by Morrison. The word rememory has a central position within this circle. Sethe explains that once something occurs, it will not cease to exist. For her it is a repetition of a memory as well as the repetition of real events. Disremembered and unaccounted for are two things that Morrison actively aims to undo with her novel *Beloved*.

Sexuality, Love and Desire

“To get a place where you could love anything you chose- not need permission for desire- well now, *that* was freedom” (Morrison 2007: 191). The complexity of female sexuality, love and desire in relation with slavery is addressed by Morrison in *Beloved*. There are several different types of representation of their bodies, their sexuality and their love. There is the meaning that is ascribed to their bodies from the colonial point of view. Then there is the meaning that they give, as subjects, to their own and other bodies. Additionally, their drives and desires are formed by the institution of slavery. Morrison shows how the women express their sexuality, love and desire by establishing positions which they can inhabit as women.

The colonial point view in the novel ties the indigenous quality of African-American people to the animalistic, denying them their humanity. The first owner of Sweet Home plantation, Mr. Garner, regarded the African slaves as men. They were allowed to own guys and to marry. The second owner of the plantation, simply referred to as the schoolteacher, did not share this view. The slaves were stripped from their subjectivity and brought down to the level of animals. This can be seen in the scene in which Sethe overhears schoolteacher teaching his sons about her anatomy. What she hears horrifies her. “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228). The schoolteacher’s view of African Americans sharing the same characteristics as animals is imposed on her. By describing Sethe’s human reaction upon hearing his statement creates space for the reader to relate to her.

Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray envisioned a liberation of sexuality in which the female experiences are voiced and implemented. Morrison achieves this through the literary device of the novel. By filing the novel as historical fiction, Toni Morrison is able to subtly give a voice to the female experience within the existing historical discourse. She examines female sexuality, love and desires under the yoke of slavery. Through abuse and pain slaves became estranged from their bodies. It is through the character of Sethe that Morrison tells about the complex nature of the feminine and slavery. She describes how on Sethe back blooms a cherry oak tree, a collage of scars made by a whip on the night that she escaped. On the front, her breasts, which are described as tired, symbolize her complex and consuming maternal role. It is Paul D who reads her bodily discourse. In the final scene between these two characters Paul D offers to bathe Sethe. Although her dialogue seems simple, it reveals a lot about Sethe’s sexuality, drives and desires. Wanting to reconcile with her past, she believes

Paul D could hold the key. Yet she is afraid that her body, which represents the different aspects of her self, the mother, the lover, the slave, will fall apart. “Will he do her in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (Morrison 2007: 321). Her bodily discourse voices the tiredness and uncertainties she feels, but also the willingness to finally place herself in someone else’s hands. “[...] the relationship here is not one of merging or of domination but of resonating “likeness” and empathic understanding” says Barbara Schapiro in her essay “The Bond of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” (1991). It is exactly the kind of relationship of “her (and his) body and to the other body” of which Cixous speaks according to Conley in *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984: 59). Paul D is able to understand Sethe by reading her body. Through Sethe Morrison shows how the body can be used to communicate to the self and connect to other bodies.

An additional effect of the horrors done to the bodies of the enslaved people is that the meaning of their drives and desires changed. From an early age, slaves are denied essential human interaction. The novel shows a love hunger connected to emotional starvation. Barbara Schapiro, in her previously mentioned essay on love and boundaries of self, speaks of the basic need in every child to receive a loving response and recognition from an other as well as being able to give this to others (1991: 195). If this need is not met the child can develop a terrible love hunger and a lot of anger (ibid.). In *Beloved* such a state of mutual recognition is not established for most of the characters since parenthood is denied to all generations. The drives and desires of the mothers, the sisters and the daughters in the novel all revolve around recognition. Morrison shows the anger that is developed by the child through the character of Beloved, Sethe’s murdered child. She desires recognition enough to return to Sweet Home, after her murder, first as a ghost and later as a young woman. She is dominant, angry and tyrannical. The unhealthy quality of the relationships she establishes with her sister Denver and her mother Sethe can be best seen in the following passage:

Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine

(Morrison 2007: 255-256)

Denver establishes her subjectivity through Beloved's acknowledging of her existence. Sethe seeks to mend the past by over-indulging Beloved with her love and affection. Beloved attempts to obtain the recognition of her mother by consuming her. The unhealthy quality of the relationships between these three women is further visible through Morrison's use of language. "Punctuation disappears, leaving the sentence of each participant open to the sentence of the next speaker, and the personal pronouns *I* and *you* move toward each other, losing their difference first to become interchangeable and then to mesh in the possessive *mine*" (Wyatt 1991: 481). The link between love and possession is at the core of this passage. Possession is additionally significant in the context of their shared collective identity. "You are mine" is of course what the slave owners said" (482). The violence which comes from these drives and desires is best shown by Sethe and Beloved. Beloved almost destroys Sethe physically as well as mentally in the second half of the book and Sethe murders her children out of love.

Morrison incorporates the complexity of female desires and drives in order to construct an accurate representation of the experiences of slave women. The recognition that is sought manifests itself bodily in the novel and is thus connected to rich imagery. Desire is transformed to hunger in *Beloved*. Schapiro defines two types of imagery that show this dimension: ocular related imagery and oral related imagery (198). Ocular imagery is connected to the vision and eyes, oral imagery refers to the mouth and speech. The vision is often described as the most dominant sense. Desire is constructed the moment the eyes land on someone, or something. According to Schapiro: "In the logic of the unconscious world, the desire to get and "drink in" with the eyes is akin to the oral wish to consume" (1991: 200). This explains the dimension between the two types of imagery in *Beloved*. Sethe's eyes are described as being empty. As a character who cannot shake the atrocities and the loss from the past, the description is in line with her experiences. Her face is: "[...] a mask with mercifully punched out eyes" (Morrison 2007: 10). The combination between ocular and oral imagery is also very present throughout the novel. After Beloved chases Paul D out of the house the three women live alone together. The situation slowly starts to escalate. Beloved demands all Sethe's attention and time. "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (68). As the story moves on Sethe forgets to take care of herself, gives all of her food to her daughter resulting in her weakened physical condition. Meanwhile Beloved expands. "Beloved ate up

her life, swelled up with it, grew taller on it [...]” (295). It can be concluded that hunger has symbolic as well as a literal meaning.

Bodily discourse, the use of ocular and oral related imagery and the multifaceted theme of desires are all combined to give a voice to the experiences of enslaved women within a slave holding society. This bodily inscription of desire in *Beloved* can be linked to French *écriture féminine*. “In body. – More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body” (Cixous 1976: 886). The perspectives, positions and desires in the story are inhabitable by women as women and that is how *écriture féminine* is used as a method in *Beloved*.

The Maternal

The novel *Beloved* deals with one of the most underrepresented experiences of maternity, namely the maternal as it is lived by slave women. The institution of slavery denied African-American women motherhood just as it also denied sisterhood, selfhood, friendship, partnership and daughterhood. This resulted in a problematized construction of the self⁵. Morrison provides a number of different narrative voices to bring this issue to light. Characters that can be associated with the maternal are for example, Sethe and her mother in law Baby Suggs but also Paul D and Denver's teacher Mrs. Jones. It is through the maternal that many of the women in *Beloved* try to construct their subjectivity. Morrison explores the problematic nature of this issue through three characters: grandmother Baby Suggs, Sethe and her daughter Denver. Baby Suggs fails to establish her subjectivity, Sethe attempts it vigorously by mothering her ghost-child Beloved and Denver finds a way to let the maternal be an expression of the self, thus gaining her subjectivity.

The character of Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's ex-husband Halle, is an older woman when the reader first meets her. Looking back on her life she realizes that she has lost her subjectivity but she does not know or attempt to reclaim it. At one moment Baby Suggs illustrates the loss of self she has experienced:

“Could she [Baby Suggs] sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?” (Morrison 2007, 165)

This quote illustrates how sisterhood, motherhood, selfhood, friendship, partnership, daughterhood are all denied to Baby Suggs and how she experiences this loss keenly. According to Irigaray, in order for a woman to become a female subject, a way to communicate identities is needed. This way she does not disappear in the symbolic nowhere of maternity. However, as this quote illustrates, this is problematic since all female identities are being denied.

Toni Morrison shows three dimensions of the maternal as it is experienced by slave women. The second dimension is embodied by Sethe. “Looking Into the Self That Is No Self: An Examination of Subjectivity in *Beloved*” (1998) by Jennifer L. Holden-Kirwan concludes

⁵ For a more extensive reading on the self see *History of structuralism Volume 2: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*. Especially from chapter 31 “The Subject; or, The Return of the Repressed” onwards this book is helpful. Among others Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida are involved with this concept.

that “As a child, Sethe is denied access to the maternal look. In giving birth to her own children, she attempts to achieve subjectivity through motherhood” (424). She has never gotten the recognition she sought from her mother and consequently, Sethe seeks to gain it from her murdered daughter. She identifies herself through the maternal ⁶ and considers her children to be, quite literally, the best part of her. By attempting to murder her children she hopes to save that last part of herself which is good from being dirtied by the effects of slavery.

“That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. White might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing- the part of her that was clean” (Morrison 2007: 295-296)

However, a terrible guilt for having killed her daughter eats Sethe. In order to make up to Beloved, she gives all she has to her. It is Denver who saves her by mobilizing the community to exorcize Beloved. It is not until this has happened that Sethe can become a subject. In the final scene Sethe speaks to Paul D and puts her tired body parts in his hands. Now in a state of mutual recognition, Paul D can show Sethe that she is her own best thing, not her children.

“She left me.”

“Aw, girl. Don’t cry.”

“She was my best thing.” (Morrison 2007: 321)

To which Paul D responds: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322). Sethe reconciles with her past, also represented by the exorcizing of Beloved. It is not until Paul D points it out that Sethe can recognize that her own identity does not only denote her role as a mother, that she can become a female subject.

A character which gains her subjectivity as the plot develops in the way suggested by Irigaray is Sethe’s daughter Denver. In the beginning of the novel Sethe keeps Denver away from the black community by not letting her leave the house on Bluestone Road. Sethe also does not acknowledge Denver’s sexual development and Denver feels embarrassed when Paul

⁶ For more information: “Maternal Bonds as Devourers of Women’s Individuation in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (1992) by Stephanie A. Dematrakopoulos analyzes Sethe’s relationship with her children by looking into how society denied Sethe motherhood. An additional essay which is worth looking at is “Giving Body to the World: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (1993) by Jean Wyatt. Among other things she looks at the linguistic significance of Sethe’s speech development in the novel with regards to Beloved.

D enters the house and she witnesses her mother's sexuality. The way in which Denver seeks to affirm her female subjectivity is through the acknowledging gaze of the women around her. Since her mother cannot provide this affirmation Denver seeks it with Beloved. "For Denver, it was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other" (Morrison 2007: 139). Her new-found sister Beloved does not look at Denver in a sexual demanding, or critical way. Simply by acknowledging her presence Denver gains agency. Jennifer L. Holden-Kirwan in "Looking Into the Self That Is No Self: An Examination of Subjectivity in *Beloved*" (1998) connects this to Lacan and his idea that this connects to desire instead of demand (424). By establishing a connection through desire Denver gains subjectivity, much in the way outlined by Irigaray. Her identity as a woman is communicated. By the end of the novel Denver has not only gained a sense of self but also takes on the role of primary caretaker of Sethe and Beloved. She steps into the community to go to school and to find a job. It is because she has reached out to other women that the community eventually mobilizes and exorcises the angry ghost. Beloved figures as the maternal love that cannot let go and prevents the mother, Sethe, from entering history and community. Denver figures as the young child who gains her own subjectivity as a woman by being acknowledged by Beloved and the women in the community.

What Toni Morrison accomplishes in *Beloved* is portraying enslaved people as subjects instead of oppressed objects (Kirwan 1998: 415). She shows how three women struggle to attain their subjectivity and how this is connected to the concept of the maternal and the underdevelopment of the self. Morrison writes about the maternal instinct as belonging to their drives and desires, in the way that *écriture féminine* outlines. Through Baby Suggs she shows how the connection between femininity and the maternal can be made. Sethe's identity she develops around motherhood and the maternal instinct to show how it takes away her female subjectivity. Denver cannot see her mother as a woman. She is first portrayed as a child but eventually, through recognition by other women, she can claim her female subjectivity. Through Denver Morrison portrays the woman which *écriture féminine* describes. One who sees the maternal instinct as an expression of the self.

Final Conclusions

The female subject is the primary force behind the novel *Beloved* (2007) by Toni Morrison. The female characters in the novel portray the African-American women who lived in post-Civil War America. It can be categorized as historical fiction where the form of the novel follows its content. This is because the novel consists of many narratives, structured circularly, where the past and the present are paralleled. Morrison makes extensive use of language by incorporating literary devices in order to enhance the quality of her representation. Among others she makes use of symbolism, metaphors, narration, point of view, dreams and punctuation. Additionally, she incorporates African-American and African history, culture and folklore. The combining of personal history with national and even global history is evidently one of Morrison's goals, as it is established in the character of Beloved. This fluidity, linked to the feminine sexuality which rejects binary oppositions is a significant element of *écriture féminine*. The fact that Morrison is using language as a tool to establish a place for women within existing the dominant discourse means that she is using women's writing in order to establish change.

The women in *Beloved* all carry their experiences with slavery on and in their bodies. Morrison does not shrink away from laying bare the physical and mental horrors to which they were exposed. However, instead of merely describing it for political gain she gives a complete account of their experiences by giving the women a feminine discourse that speaks through the entire body. What words cannot say they show with their hands, eyes, breasts. The environment in which enslaved individuals grew up did not allow for the correct development of the self. Desires changed under the institution of slavery. The resulting love hunger, with all its depths and layers is explored by Morrison. Throughout the novel she makes use of ocular and oral imagery to complement this notion. The unveiling of feminine sexuality, love and desire within a society based on slavery enriches the existing representation of slave women in historical discourses. Morrison writes women's bodies into history, in accordance with *écriture féminine*.

Directly tied to sexuality, love and desire is the maternal. Where the maternal was a problematic concept in classical literature to begin with, in combination with slavery, it becomes even more complex. The relatable dimensions of sisterhood, selfhood, friendship, partnership and daughterhood are also denied to African-American women. Toni Morrison explores all the concepts and opens them up for other women to understand. The characters of Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver are most notably related to the maternal. Grandmother Baby

Suggs can, moments before her death, only recognize the subjectivity that was denied to her. Sethe first establishes subjectivity through her children, not as woman but as a mother. She can only attain female subjectivity after Beloved is exorcised. Her daughter Denver grows up sheltered but finds recognition in other women and eventually enters into the community where she attains female subjectivity. She shows how the maternal role is an expression of the female subject. Through these three women Morrison shows that the establishing of relations between subjects is necessary in order to deconstruct the uneven balance of the maternal.

The way in which Toni Morrison employs *écriture féminine* in order to write women's experiences into the existing structures of Western thought can be further analyzed. The dimensions connected to the maternity such as sisterhood, selfhood, friendship, partnership and daughterhood for example, can prove to be insightful. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. What Toni Morrison has accomplished with *Beloved* is taking a great step towards a just representation of African American women in history and in literature, by honoring her experiences. The sensitive, fragile, dreamy women from classic literature are left behind. Women's writing such as *Beloved* looks at what women have, instead at what they lack. In this novel women's strength, voice, sexuality and worth are acknowledged. I spoke about women's writing and this is what it can be.

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