

Beloved: America's Grammar Book



W~~hat~~ do we mean by the word “beloved”? I am not referring to the word as it is used in the title of Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, or in the title of the 1998 film directed by Barry Levinson. I am referring to the word as it is used in the title of the 1987 book, *Beloved: America’s Grammar Book*, written by the author of the novel, Toni Morrison. In this book, Morrison explores the history of the English language and its relationship to African American culture. She argues that the language has been shaped by African American speech patterns, particularly those of slaves and their descendants. She also discusses the ways in which African Americans have used the language to express their own unique perspectives and experiences. Morrison’s book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the study of language and literature.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 261. Copyright © 1987 by Toni Morrison. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

KARLA FC HOLLOWAY

Karla F.C. Holloway is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (2014), *Private Bodies, Public Texts: Race, Gender, and a Cultural Bioethics* (2011), and *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White: A Memoir* (2006).

T
he word “beloved” is a powerful one. It has the ability to evoke strong emotions and feelings. It can be used to describe someone who is loved deeply, or it can be used to describe something that is dear to one’s heart. In Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, the word “beloved” is used to describe the central character, Sethe. Sethe is a former slave who has returned to her home town of Ohio after being freed. She is trying to start a new life for herself and her two young children, but she is haunted by the memory of her past. She is constantly reminded of the horrors of slavery and the pain that it caused her. She is also reminded of the love that she had for her husband, who was killed by white slaveholders. Sethe’s love for her family and her desire to protect them from the same fate that happened to her drives her to do whatever it takes to keep them safe. She is a strong, determined woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to protect her loved ones.

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

the novel's title, *Beloved*, and the book's subtitle, "A Novel." The first part of the title is italicized, while the second part is not.

It is the second part of the title, "A Novel," that is the subject of the present article. In this section, I will argue that the subtitle is not merely descriptive, but also serves as a critical intervention into the field of African American literature. Specifically, I will argue that the subtitle is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

The subtitle, "A Novel," is a critical intervention into the field of African American literature because it challenges the dominant narrative of African American literature as a field of study.

e be ed a . hei i e, _ i edbe_ d

You

Beloved

19

it is not a story to be avoided,
it is not a story to tell,
it is not a story to share.

20

ENDNOTES

¹ Article I, section II of the U.S. Constitution, also known as the representation clause, declared that each slave would count as “three-½ths of a free person” in matters of congressional representation and taxation. It protected the property of those who held slaves but at the same time quixotically rendered the enslaved to both categories: they were property as well as (partial) persons.

² In 1856, Margaret Garner and her family escaped from Kentucky to Cincinnati. They were found by slave catchers and returned to their owners, but not before Garner killed her daughter with a butcher knife. As tragic and pitiful as this story is by itself, its accompanying legal conundrum marks the case as one that explains the peculiar intersectionality of persons and property. Garner’s defense lawyer, hoping her trial might be in a free state, claimed she was a person who committed murder. But Kentucky argued for federal rule; she was property to be returned to her owner. See Stephen Weisenberger, *Margaret Garner: A Slave’s Fight for Freedom in Cincinnati and Kentucky* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).

³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

⁴ Toni Morrison,

- Becoming*; 11 Ibid.
- 12 Morrison, *Becoming*, 35–36.
- 13 As I write “linguistic and literary structures” I recall the title of my 1978 doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Linguistic and Literary Structures in Toni Morrison’s Novels*. It is with some satisfaction that I notice this consistency in my vision and interests, and that even then I was focused on the combinations, both “the key [as well as] the codes.”
- 14 I believed then, as I do now, this to be a correct (and decidedly humbling) determination of the reviewer who expressed her disappointment in the execution of *“A Crossroads Novel”*. Cheryl Wall suggested that there was more potential in the title than the text of my dissertation-become-book. See Cheryl A. Wall, “Black Women Writers: Journey Along Motherlines,” *Cultural Studies* 39 (Spring 1989): 419–422.
- 15 Morrison, *Becoming*, 88–89.
- 16 The derivation of the word *literature* is from the Greek *λιτερα* (*λίτερος*), or “art of letters.”
- 17 Karla FC Holloway, “*Becoming*: A Spiritual,” *Cultural Studies* 13 (Summer 1990): 516–525.
- 18 Ibid. The epigraph is the title and first line of a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, “One Wants a Teller,” in *Becoming* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 132.
- 19 Morrison, *Becoming*, 275.
- 20 Ralph Ellison,