To Tell the Impossible Story:
Morrison, Patching History, and the Creative Demand of the Black Archive

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The challenge of black history is a dilemma over absence. There have been moments in this nation’s unfolding when the constraint of absence on black history has overdetermined what is actually absent and sacrificed what is in fact, present. This anticipation of black absence at the cost of black presence colored a significant moment during the civil rights movement. The N.A.A.C.P. held its 1963 national convention in Chicago at the Morrison Hotel. Before the convention took place the N.A.A.C.P. demanded that two statuettes of black jockeys standing in the lobby be removed. And they were. In her invocation of this moment in time in her essay “Rediscovering Black History,” Toni Morrison asks: “What on earth did little statues of black jockeys have to do with the civil-rights movement?” (Denard 39). For Morrison, the removal of the black jockey statuettes was due to an “insistence of knowledgeable Negroes who represented us out there in the white world. All because of what they [the white public] thought rather than what we knew” (Denard 40). Granted, the brutal history of athleticism, black masculinity, and its white fetishization could have determined the N.A.A.C.P.’s insistence on the black jockey statuettes removal, but that confluence was not operative here. The N.A.A.C.P.’s decision gave power to a controlling white idea of “cultural worth.” Instead of holding out the possibility of historically retrieving black genius, the N.A.A.C.P. anticipated black subjugation and absence over and above that possibility. Morrison encapsulates this moment in history and its battle over black cultural respectability when she states:

During those intense years, one felt both excitement and a sense of loss. In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every black man’s coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every black hand. We abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. When Civil Rights became Black Power, we frequently chose exoticism over reality. Instead of being delighted that the profession of being a jockey virtually belonged to black men before 1900; that fourteen of the first twenty-seven Kentucky Derby races were
won by black jockeys -- we draped the figures and hid their glory not only from white eyes but from our own eyes (Denard 41).

What Morrison is articulating in this passage is the double-sidedness of asserting black presence within a saturated history of black absence -- factually absent, as was the case with the N.A.A.C.P.’s request for the statuettes removal, but also imaginatively and bodily absent, as well. This is a problem for the archive and also a challenge for the imagination. Morrison confronts both through her linked archival projects, *The Black Book* (1974) and *Beloved* (1987).

The dilemma of protecting black presence amidst black absence -- perceived, imagined, or actual, contextualizes the structure and method of *The Black Book*. In 1974, a little over ten years after the N.A.A.C.P. national convention in Chicago, Morrison, then editor at Random House, began work on *The Black Book* with a team of black collectors. *The Black Book* sought to intervene in the lack of black cultural narrative content available to an American public. Black history was being fabricated when it did not have to be, or worse, as evidenced in the situation with the N.A.A.C.P.’s handling of the black jockey statuettes, black history was being crafted under a rubric of respectability, intellectual “containment,” and white acceptance. Whether articulated as such, what Morrison tasked herself through her participation in the publication of *The Black Book* and then in the writing of *Beloved* was a direct engagement with the historicizing agenda of the archive. And by “archive” I mean it in the broadest sense available: the intellectual, political, and socially available space that rescued, recognized, and provided access to the “stuff” that makes up the unfolding story of black struggle, resilience, and emotional integrity.

Morrison acts as “archivist” in both *The Black Book* and *Beloved*, but an archivist with a very particular attention to the sensibilities of the imagination. These two projects are in conversation with the challenge of black history articulated earlier by the N.A.A.C.P. episode by positing the imagination’s capacity for meaning-making as the crucial intervention into that dilemma. Morrison
approaches black history in *The Black Book* and *Beloved* as a speculative thought experiment. The problem of black history and consequently, the black archive is deep absence. But as indicated in both projects, Morrison resists the seduction of pronounced absence to discredit the possibility of presence. The imagination is the site of cognitive possibility and that lends itself to the messy business of making, doing, and living history. Both *The Black Book* and *Beloved* utilize the imaginative function of gathering fragmented content otherwise logically separated, to create a space of holistic emotional black presence that not only bears witness to the trauma responsible for those fragments, but also asserts a level of ownership over those traumatic life pieces through collaboration that is dependent upon the imagination.

This project argues from the theorization of the black archive advanced by Morrison in the prefatory poem to *The Black Book* to assert a reading of history as an imaginative emotional patchworking in both *The Black Book* and *Beloved* through the scrapbook technique of juxtaposition. Both texts are invested in ownership of narrative fragments and the possibilities of meaning unlocked through these fragments’ creative collaboration -- scraps strengthening other scraps. The scrapbook’s dedication to content’s destabilization and mixture provides the methodology necessary for *The Black Book* and *Beloved* to execute some response to the challenge of black history presented by the archive’s limit -- blockages in access to moments of black presence. Morrison makes clear through *Beloved*’s juxtaposed plot and relationship to the archive the necessary act of willed imagination to move past the archival limit and instead use what the archive makes available for black emotional self-fashioning.

**The Scrapbook, The Black Book, and The Conflict of Black History**

*The Black Book* pursues the problem of the black archive and its implications for black life in its prefatory poem authored by Morrison. It is through this paratextual component and the history it invokes that Morrison is able to set in motion both a theorization of the black archive and also a
method for engaging it. The prefatory poem moves through the cultural breadth afforded to paratextual matter to posit a social history sensitive to what is and is not available to archival presentation and historical narrative. To do this, Morrison first names the archive. The prefatory poem begins: “I am The Black Book” (Harris v). This line is the introduction of The Black Book to the reader and suggests that it will be speaking in this poem. It is thus important that The Black Book sets out in its preface to acknowledge its own recovery of history through all that is present and absent in that history. The poem continues as a narrative construction of the content found in the following pages of the book. The poem sets up a book that is acting as custodian of the broken estate of black history, attuned to the absences and presences produced through that brokenness.

The book is both actor of history and repository for that history. The Black Book is “all the ways I have failed” (Harris v) -- whether through the “the black slave owner” or documented black purchases of “Dr. Palmer’s skin whitener.” The logic and transparency of history’s intent, which is needed in order to make sense as to how blacks owned other blacks or how black fingers could rub bleach on their skin, escapes any archive and thus also escapes The Black Book. But these absences must never discredit what is available to the story of black life. The successes at black living: the “hundreds of patented inventions,” the “gold mined,” and overall “trails blazed” attest to the fullness of the black archive that must work in conjunction with its wounds and rampant absences, never attempting to compensate or cover up those absences.

It is through the recognition and alliance of that which is absent and present in its history that The Black Book is able to assert survival as that history’s custodian when all sought to destroy it. The Black Book asserts that it is “all the ways I survived” (Harris v). Whether through Bessie Smith’s “winning a roller-skating contest,” “fourteen black jockeys winning the Kentucky Derby,” or “hoecake coked on a hoe,” The Black Book is relentless dedication to its survival to the extent that its food was cooked on the same farming tool that signaled its enslavement. The Black Book attempts to
deal with the complexity of black history, the pull and tug of its historical unfolding -- the pull of the fragmented past and the tug of its anticipated future.

This poem concludes by arguing for a radical fashioning of the black archive that is not only its own witness to its insufficiency, but committed to critically speculating through what is present that which is missing from its archival purview. This call to duty is made lucid in the last stanza of the prefatory poem:

I am not complete here; there is much more,
but there is no more time and no more space…and I have journeys to take,
ships to name, and crews.

Arguably, this is the stanza that most explicitly enunciates a theory of praxis for the black archive. *The Black Book* acknowledges its own archival limit in this stanza stating it is “not complete here” and that “there is much more.” But as the next line indicates, the black archive cannot consume itself in apprehending comprehensive content. The absences within the black archive must not be approached as “content-in-waiting,” but honored *because* of their very emptiness. Any engagement with the black archive must commit itself to the integrity of the archive’s silences. By stating that there is “no more time and no more space,” *The Black Book* jettisons the impulse to collect and compile indefinitely as substitute for the archive’s pauses, gaps, and holes -- some of which can never be retrieved. The condition of blackness is presupposed as an assault on black wholeness -- physical, spiritual, cultural, and otherwise. As this stanza clearly states, the black archive must accept when it has exhausted its capacity to historicize even when there is a longing to recover more.

However, as the ellipsis in the stanza suggests, the acceptance of the archive’s limit is not the telos of black archival work. Denoting an omission, an ellipsis is understood as never compromising overall meaning. The ellipsis functions in this stanza then, as a printed visual commitment to what must be omitted from the archive --- not by choice, but because history’s brokenness exceeds the structure
and conceptual agenda of the archive. What follows the ellipsis is what allows for this poem to be both a theory of the black archive and practitioner of the black archival imagination: “and I have journeys to take, ships to name, and crews” (Harris v). *The Black Book* is inserting itself in the very event of black history that has left so much of the black archive empty -- the Middle Passage. This is the enunciation of the imaginative call to arms that will buttress the content and structure of both *Beloved* and *The Black Book*.

Considering the book’s analytical and cultural agenda, *The Black Book* is a cultural product that is difficult to summarize or condense. *The Black Book* is a collection of more than five hundred documents, photographs, and articles that fashion an imaginative narrative of the black experience from slavery to the civil rights movement. There are slave sale receipts, patents by black American inventors, sheet music for negro spirituals, pictures of black cowboys, and everything in-between. *The Black Book* presents the robustness of the black experience in America, which must runs off of its pages considering the limits of the archive’s grasp. *The Black Book* is not organized like a typical book that can be read cover to cover according to a linear temporal progression. Instead, *The Black Book* is structured like a mused improvisation allowing the fragments of black history to roam free, touch, and artistically collaborate. *The Black Book* bears witness to black striving and black struggle in a distinctively *adjoint* way.

*The Black Book* begins with a quote from Ivory Coast writer, Bernard Dadie. It reads: “I was there when the angel drove out the ancestor. I was there when the waters consumed the mountains” (Harris 1). The quote is positioned above a medium close up of a beautiful shirtless African woman adorned in jewelry staring intently into a distance not visible in the photograph. This photograph and its adjoining quote are invoking an attention to the *spatial overload* that will ground the structural and affective dimensions of *The Black Book*. Whether it is Dadie’s witnessing of the other-worldly genesis of imperialism or the mountains succumbing to water at the hand of foreign ships or a
horizon absent from the borders of the photograph, *The Black Book*, as a whole, makes commentary on the vastness of black history and subsequently the black archive, but also recognizes the absences, concealments, and altogether oblations within that same history -- this is the challenge of black history.

The second page of *The Black Book* is an excerpt from Weiner’s *Africa and the Discovery of America* exploring Christopher Columbus’ nation-building enterprise and Africa’s presence in it. *The Black Book* moves from this excerpt into a presentation of a photograph of John Brown walking to his hanging, records of black slave owners, and a letter to Cornelius Vanderbilt from black Vaudeville artist, Bert Williams requesting a cakewalk showdown. These documents attest to the complexity and historical extension of the “peculiar institution.” The experience of slavery in the United States encompasses a state’s murder of a white abolitionist, black residents of the District of Columbia receiving upwards of five-thousand dollars to release their slaves after slavery’s abolitionment, and white appropriation in the minstrel circuit of a slavery created art-form of white aristocratic critique. *The Black Book* makes clear the reverberating effects of slavery across racial, class, and commercial lines.

The rest of *The Black Book* is constructed as an overflowing melting pot: flyers from the minstrel circuit, Ku-Klux clan murder reports, proceedings from the national convention of the Colored Men of America, and voodoo healing recipes -- and in that order. The richness of the archive in *The Black Book* provides proof of black presence in moments assumed to be riddled by black absence. Take for example the section of *The Black Book* showcasing the active black presence in the American west, often presented to be a location scant if not altogether vacant of black people. In this section, *The Black Book* displays black American western life through several newspaper clippings and various photographs. Newspaper clippings depicting black rancher Willis Meade and his capture of the infamous “Two Toed” wolf killing cattle and the story of a former Missouri
female slave having an opera house’s chair named after her in a Colorado city make an argument for contesting black absence through a retrieval of printed matter. As indicated by this example, The Black Book is functioning with what is present in black history to offer a counter narrative to what is rendered as absent. However, The Black Book is honest with the fact that absence in the black archive is not always a question of further discovery. These newspaper clippings documenting black life in the American west are unreferenced in The Black Book. Omitting references is not a stylistic convention in The Black Book. If a reference is not provided it is because it was absent. The team of collectors that produced The Black Book worked with clips of newspapers, literally clipped from its context. This is the dilemma of black history: the same text that witnesses to black presence in a space assumed to be signed with black absence testifies, through its alienation from context, the inescapability of fragmented black history.

The Black Book is not seeking to invent or make up history, but simply to wonder with the “scraps” of history available. Considering this, it makes sense that The Black Book utilizes the scrapbook form for making historical use out of that which is incoherent, missing and in the case of the black archive, that which is under attack. The cultural genesis of the scrapbook places the scrapbook genre in direct conversation with the fundamental question presented by Morrison with respect to the Black archive: how does one go about creating a present when there is only a fragment of lived history available? According to literary scholar Ellen Garvey, the scrapbook functioned to “anticipate shortage” (11). The anticipation of shortage that drove the activity of scrapbooking lends itself to the project of The Black Book, which seeks to encompass the fragments of black history. The collecting of newspaper clippings, post cards, and other visual images that characterizes the scrapbook should not be interpreted as hording random material. Rather, the scrapbook represents an effort to capture wrinkles in time, like the ones represented by the unnamed newspaper clippings presented in The Black Book. The scrapbook functions as a printed
time capsule of sorts -- seeking to protect, through collection and compilation, material that is prone to erasure.

Arguably accounting for the temporal warping of *The Black Book*, the scrapbook is committed to capturing and preserving life as *remembered*. “Many scrapbooks are diaries of sorts -- a form of life writing that may or may not be chronological but records and preserves elements of life experience and memory cues,” writes Garvey (15). *Sustained* black living is always under attack by structures desiring normativity. As such, memory becomes a tool of sustenance for black living. Therefore, through the freedom granted memory by the form of the scrapbook, *The Black Book* is able to construct a narrative that is temporally precarious, in position for memory’s engagement. *The Black Book* executes the methodology of the scrapbook form to aid in the dilemma of black history - - protecting what is available to memory and making creative “room” for that which can never be found through memory because of traumatic absence. *The Black Book* is able to communicate a response to this dilemma by deploying a common tool of the scrapbook, the “language of juxtaposition” (Garvey 131). By colliding printed matter -- text and image, that may or may not otherwise be connected, *The Black Book* makes the case through print for this material’s *cultural connection* because of their common brokenness and fragmentation.

A page documenting the aftermath of four black men’s lynchings is one example of this technique of juxtaposition. By acknowledging the common fractures within black history, that ubiquitous brokenness becomes a tool to fill in those same gaps creatively:
Here *The Black Book* gathers the ubiquitous brokenness of black history and creatively uses that plentitude of brokenness as a tool to fill in those same gaps plaguing black history -- simply, broken pieces put together tend not to look so broken. By juxtaposing an excerpt, better, a fragment of Langston Hughes’ poem, “Negro” above a photograph of four black lynched men on public display, *The Black Book* testifies to the historically sustained practice of black brokenness, but at the same time exercises imaginative sense-making through its juxtaposition of content. The excerpt from the poem reads: “I’ve been a victim/The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo/They lynched me in Texas” (qtd. in Harris 55). The photograph below Hughes’ excerpt has four men hung by their necks to a tree. The black archive can never provide the names of these men. The setting of this lynching remains elusive from the black archive, as well. The crime, if any, is not offered here because it is not available. By placing Hughes’ poem in “juxtaposition” with this image, *The Black Book* is able to advance a creative assessment of history and imagine answers for the
fragments presented by the photograph. Only through the scrapbook’s ability to juxtapose text and image and dance with scattered memory is *The Black Book* able to use a fragment to fill a fragment. The fragmented poem placed atop the photograph identifies Hughes as the unnamed men lynched in the photograph: “I have been a victim” (qtd. in Harris 55, my emphasis). Because of *The Black Book*’s scrapbook orientation, Hughes is now the presence able to make sense of the absence of black subjectivity laced on the photograph. The fragmented poem is able to intervene in another question of absence presented by the photograph, that of place. Where were these men lynched? Again, by juxtaposing fragments next to other fragments, *The Black Book* can use Hughes’ poem and its location in the Congo and in Texas as getting closer to crafting some response to that curiosity into black absence.

It is only through the scrapbook form and its language of juxtaposition that *The Black Book* is able to reimagine an agency over one of history’s most barbaric engagements with black life -- the American spectacle of lynching, even when to do so requires identifying as a victim. Morrison seems to be arguing that victimization yields agency once the codes of victimization are revised at the site of the black traumatic past. The act of identifying as a victim carries with it an assumed depletion of agency. However, the example of Hughes’ poem and the lynching photograph provide a powerful retort. If *The Black Book* has identified itself in its preface as its own historical actor with its own historical script, then it is *The Black Book* that is making the assessment over its status as victim. Victimization is often considered the revocation of agency, but the victimizer too often executes this assessment. When the victim possesses his or her own victimhood, agency can began to flow from where it is desired, not from where it was stolen. Something salvific is communicated with respect to self-possession and black emotional self-making at the site of American lynching when it is *The Black Book* advancing that assertion of self. Invoking black victimhood provides an insight into all
the ways institutionally meditated hurt has worked against black survival and as a result, protects one from having to relinquish care for that hurt to the forces that caused it in which to begin.

This page exemplifies Morrison’s praxis of the black archive articulated in the preface of The Black Book, which is the practice of utilizing absence to make presence. By bringing together otherwise unacquainted printed matter like a poem and photograph, the scrapbook instincts of The Black Book are able to author histories unavailable logically, but in-waiting creatively. As seen in the page with Hughes’ poem and the lynching photograph, the scrapbook’s proclivity to printed mixture, a creative act indeed, can provide some cognitive tools for laboring through memory’s brokenness. Garvey states:

Making scrapbooks both saved a record or archive of materials and performed archivalness: the act of cutting and pasting allows the clipper the experience of making a record. Like ostentatiously photographing or taking notes on some form of public misconduct, it documents and serves notice that the event is being documented. Though scrapbook making might be more private, the scrapbook maker’s action is a performance that promises, “I will remember.” (154)

The chance at remembering that Garvey attaches to the scrapbook form takes as its departure creative supplementation. This is nothing more than another dimension to the language of juxtaposition energizing the scrapbook. The Black Book does the “cutting and pasting” emblematic of the scrapbook on a level of supplementation by first, cutting the fullness of Hughes’ poem into a fragment and then, pasting that fragment to a fragmented photograph to supplement the total meaning of both the poem and the photograph.

If the conflict of black history is a question of sense making amid many gaps and assault at black sensibility, then The Black Book articulates some response through its generic affiliation with the scrapbook. The emotional valence of the scrapbook and its printed feature of juxtaposition
The Black Book commits to honoring the integrity of the ruptures of black history while at the same time using the fullness of what is available in that same history to, if not soothe, at least bear witness, to those ruptures. The scrapbook form allows The Black Book to put in practice the creative labor Morrison articulates as inseparable from the black archive and black archival work. The black archive makes impossible the option of doing away with its limits and silences because they are so deep. And it is because of the depth of the Black archive’s absences that the act of reimagining becomes so crucial, to which the scrapbook is firmly committed and Morrison is, as well.

**Creative Black Memory, Beloved, and Patching Agency Through the Black Archive**

Morrison continues the imaginative activity of juxtaposition of narrative, present in The Black Book and generic to the scrapbook, in her construction of Beloved. The American Baptist clipping depicting Margaret Garner’s murder of her child found in The Black Book served as Morrison’s inspiration for writing Beloved. However, despite The Black Book’s attempt to juxtapose printed matter and supplemented narrative content to create meaning for the Garner clipping, there remained undeniable absences yelling through, the most piercing scream being: how could a mother kill her own child and attempt to kill the rest? Even when juxtaposed next to a clipping from Pennsylvania’s Packet and Daily Advertiser detailing the legal proceedings of a slave on trial for purchasing stolen goods and litigating his way out of punishment, the story of Margaret Garner remains viciously vacant.

The Packet and Daily clipping narrates a slave addressing a court before his sentence is carried out, saying that the thief from whom he had purchased the stolen goods was a white man. Then he asked the court if the thief would be punished if caught. The clipping reads:

“Of course he will be punished,” the judge replied.

“Then,” said the slave, “you must punish my master also. The goods I bought had no parents, but my master purchased me knowing I was stolen from my mother and father.”
Punishment was set aside (Harris 10).

This clipping is indicative of what Morrison wanted *The Black Book* to communicate and that is black Americans, even when confronted with the incomprehensibility of slavery were not de facto subjugated, hopeless objects, but were in fact “busy and smart” (“Black Book Captures”) moving history and black self-making along. Yet even with the supplementation of this juxtaposed newspaper clipping depicting black survival under the institution of slavery, it is not able to apprehend the *absoluteness of brokenness* central to the Margaret Garner newspaper article.

As the prefatory poem to *The Black Book* makes clear, the black archive can only do the job up until its limit is reached -- the *American Baptist* article presents an undeniable emotional and narrative limit of the archive. But as Morrison articulates in the preface, what is necessary to move pass that archival limit is an imaginatively critical act of willed creation. This is the only way to honor the black archive’s active silences. By utilizing the *American Baptist* article to write *Beloved*, Morrison deepens the archive to develop a more satisfying response to the problem of black absence/presence. “I didn’t do any more research at all about that story [Beloved],” Morrison said. “I really needed to invent her life” (qtd. in Rothstein). This “need” for invention is what the black archive presents. Though there is a serious risk in invention to replicate the very violences that caused the need to invent in the first place, Sadiya Hartman, scholar of African American literature and performance articulates that there truly is no other choice:

By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of “what could have been,” according to Lisa
Lowe, “symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods. (11)

As Hartman makes clear through her invocation of Lowe’s theorization of loss, it is the exact articulation of “what could have been” from loss that loss is maintained and honored. Creative speculation is not a supplanting of history’s erasures, but an honoring of those erasures to show their depth and consequence -- it is scrapping and patching the black archive so to contour its gaps for use. Morrison finds herself participating in this patchworked version history through an imaginative impulse when beginning work on Beloved.

What was present with respect to Margaret Garner’s story in the archive could only take Morrison to a certain point, of which she knew was not useful for her critical project of subjunctive and interior history. She states, “I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it” (Taylor-Guthrie 248). What Morrison is gesturing at in this excerpt is recorded history’s tendency to “flatten out” the complexity of one’s scene of living -- the people, the smells, the fears, and the hopes that can go unaccounted for in the archive. Morrison is interested in the stories that rub against other stories to create meaning together. Her attention to what “the characters had to say about it [Garner’s story]” is indicative of her investment in juxtaposed narrative, not much unlike what features in her artistic editing of The Black Book. The imagination fuels the activity of juxtaposition because of its risk in compromising what was at one time, understood fact. Juxtaposition in the scrapbook is a technique of critique. The fundamental
premise of African American scrapbooks was a contestation of white fact, asserting that “fact” was often nothing other than white truth. Ellen Garvey explains:

For African American clippers, however, it was vital to follow what the white press was saying about black people to critique the white press’s casual assumptions. When the white press wrote about black people at all, especially from the 1880s on, black were likely to appear as criminals, or as stereotyped characters in comic dialect stories. Black readers in the post-Reconstruction era critiqued the hostile white press in their writings and their scrapbooks and laid out its biases for other readers to see and discuss. (133)

The story of Margaret Garner is so much bigger than what any white newspaper clipping could ever say about it. Although the American Baptist clipping detailing Margaret Garner’s infanticide is written with an anti-slavery bent, as Garvey expresses in the above quote, the clipping still falls prey to the stereotypical assessment of blacks whose emotional state must always filter itself through white registers. The clipping describes Garner as an “unfortunate woman” who should have been “excited to madness” after killing her daughter, despite the reporter’s assertion that Garner “apparently possesses an average amount of kindness, with a vigorous intellect, and much energy of character” (Harris 10). This is exactly why Morrison felt the need to move beyond archival material so that she could listen for vestiges of black self-making at the level of emotional survival. For Morrison, the dilemma in writing Beloved seems not to be making sense of the absences pervading Margaret Garner’s story on a factual level, but instead, yielding up a kind of truth of Garner’s interior life, the dimension of the human story in which facts undoubtedly fall short. Crafting an interior life is a task for the imagination. Similarly, in Beloved it is the will of Sethe’s imaginative re-membering of her history’s fragmented past with that of others around her, in a way, practicing a juxtaposition of lived
narratives -- that she is able to shore up a lived praxis of emotional maintenance amidst deeply present trauma.

From the very start of Beloved the reader is made aware of the ways in which absence will work with the imagination to create meaning in the novel. The first page of Beloved reads “sixty million and more.” Sixty million is an estimate of the amount of lives lost during the Middle Passage. Morrison’s choice to include “and more” is a commitment to honoring the unavailable knowledge of ever knowing exactly how many lives were in fact lost during those voyages. But no sooner than turning the page does Morrison exercise an imaginative fashioning of history to ask something different of the absences riddling the previous page. The second page of the novel is the twenty-fifth verse of the ninth chapter of Romans. It reads, “I will call them my people which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.” The sixty million and more that go unclaimed and unlocated on the previous page are now placed within a biblical tradition of divine repossession. Mae G. Henderson explains the significance of this juxtaposition of fragmented history: “By citing a New Testament passage that echoes a passage from the Old Testament, Morrison thematizes the importance of historical reclamation and repossession. As Jehovah reclaimed the Israelites after their apostasy, so Morrison seeks to repossess the African and slave ancestors after their historic violation” (Henderson 82). Henderson is arguing for Morrison’s desire to reclaim the slaves that are absent from any historical record through her use of the excerpt from the book of Romans. However, what is missing from Henderson’s analysis is the deliberate attempt at juxtaposing these two fragments of history stylistically. “Sixty Million and more” is written on the first page without any punctuation. The content from the excerpted verse from Romans that follows is able then to “reach back” to the previous page mechanically and grab those sixty million and more seeking address and visibility. Morrison is crafting a grammar of narrative continuance by juxtaposing these
two texts and in the process, imaginatively possessing and filling the absences presented by any reduction of slavery’s impact.

An attention to juxtaposed narrative content makes its way from the epigraphs of the novel into the activity of its main characters. After Denver brings what appears to be a dress’s physical grip on her mother’s waist while she was praying to Sethe’s attention, she asks about that which her mother was offering up to prayer. Sethe responds:

I was talking about time. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there -- the picture of it -- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s your thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (Morrison 36)

Sethe is articulating remembered history’s susceptibility to mixture and narrative alliance beyond that of the one remembering. She is referencing a broken temporal whole in her fashioning of “rememory”. Sethe begins by telling Denver how for her she believed that rememory was as simple as deciding which memories stay and which memories leave, but as the scene’s supernatural opening gestures, remembering happens on a much larger, concealed, and participatory scale. Memory moves in the world untethered to any one “owner.” According to Sethe, memories “bump” into one another and create thought pictures not-yet anticipated. What this amounts to is an articulation of historical memory’s proclivity to juxtaposition. The “thought pictures” Sethe refers to in this passage should be understood as loci of meaning created when a memory finds itself hailed in the present. Note however, the only way a “thought picture” finds itself in the present is through an imaginative activity. A picture escapes text and in some cases, cognitive coherence. A picture requires spatial
comprehension and creative apprehension. Sethe is recognizing the connection juxtaposed “bumped memories” have with one another when creating meaning via the imagination. This remains Sethe’s dilemma throughout the novel. Mae G. Henderson articulates it in this way: “She [Sethe] must imaginatively reconstitute, or re-member her history ‘in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for her and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up her life’” (Henderson 91). What Henderson’s language orients Sethe’s experience with history to is its fragmented sensibility and desire for resolution at the level of patchworking. Re(member)ing is a project of material construction, a mode of “putting back together.” Sethe is presented with an embodied confrontation of the broken parts of her past through Beloved. The challenge of re-membering that past is made urgent for Sethe now that the “thought pictures” she thought were protected from outside manifestation are present through Beloved’s flesh.

Morrison argues for the art of narration and story-exchange as the imaginative activity Sethe must utilize if she is to begin to live into a future where emotional wholeness is a possibility. Before Sethe acknowledges Beloved’s connection to the daughter she murdered, Sethe “feeds” Beloved stories from her past. Morrison writes, “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. The hurt was always there. But, as she begin telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, like it” (Morrison 59). The crystal earrings that Mrs. Garner gave Sethe represented a moment of pride in Sethe’s past. Beloved’s desire to hear the story of these earrings asked something very liberatory of Sethe’s past. By allowing for a fragment of her story at Sweet Home to travel and satisfy the confoundment of that past through the person of Beloved, Sethe constructs a refashioning of her past that imagines herself as its narrative owner. Mae Henderson links this moment in Sethe’s development of agency to the larger challenge presented by broken black history. She states:
As historian, Sethe must liberate her present from the “burden of the past” constructed in history. She must learn to remap the past so that it becomes a blueprint for the future. Her job is to reconstitute the past through personal narrative, or storytelling. Like Morrison, Sethe uses the memory of personal experience and the “constructive imagination” as a means of re-membering a dis-remembered past, dis-remembered family, and community. (Henderson 90)

Henderson is arguing that personal narrative invested in imaginative revisions on past hurt can unlock access to a future not so burdened by the emotional impasses of the past. What is important to note in Henderson’s argument is that Sethe’s personal narration of her own history is not sufficient. She must tell that story. The commitment to witnessing Henderson is invoking here is possible only in community. Storytelling requires that stories “rub” against one another, whether it is story being offered as narrative or the story created by those who are hearing it.

Morrison concludes Beloved by testifying to the necessity of juxtaposed narrative -- creative storytelling with and through the narration of others, in forging emotional hope. The plot proper of Beloved ends when Paul D re-enters 124 Bluestone and finds Beloved’s presence markedly absent after a community of women exorcised her, but still present in the depleted psychological state of Sethe. In the moment Sethe expresses her dismay at Beloved’s removal from 124, Paul D is all of a sudden overwhelmed by the possibility of life coloring Sethe’s story once the colored quilt blanketing Baby Suggs’ death is held by a lifeless Sethe. Morrison describes his experience as:

staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella’s fist. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry -- its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being
collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. *He wants to put his story next to hers.* (Morrison 273).

The narration of history Paul D provides in this moment is figuratively bountiful. It is a masterpiece of the imagination. The wounded back created by schoolteacher’s invasion of Sethe’s sexual sovereignty is now not weak; it is “wrought-iron”. The metal shackles schoolteacher used to animalize Paul D’s claim to manhood are now “jewelry” that can compare themselves to a “baby rattle” and assert their use for that of new life. All of these imaginative fashionings of a traumatic past are contingent on the last line of his internal dialogue: his story being placed next to Sethe’s. Paul D’s attention to a “kind of tomorrow” (Morrison 273) that can be shared by both him and Sethe is unlocked when personal history meets communal imaginative narrative. Paul D understands the emotional agency available once stories from one’s past, regardless of how broken and assaulted they are gather themselves next to other broken narrative pieces. This is the overall impulse of the novel. “*Beloved* remembers, not through telling a single story, but by placing one story next to the other, insisting that each of these stories register and respond to each other, hand holding hand. This story remembers the past by gathering its pieces, placing one next to the other, and letting these pieces freely generate the future,” writes gender theorist, Emily Miller-Budick (Miller-Budick 136). Morrison has done exactly this. She has crafted a story where narrative confluence happens through a shared brokenness and then imagines that confluence as releasing a future than can be lived into emotionally self-aware. This is not a resolution of *Beloved*. That does not exist. This is most aptly a statement of faith. Morrison’s decision to end Sethe’s emotional state attached to Paul D’s desire to juxtaposed his story next to hers is a declaration of black community, an acknowledgment of black absence, and a tribute to black emotional presence.

*Beloved* and *The Black Book* are bold articulations of the courage it takes to confront the challenge of black agency within the dilemma of black history. The courage to name one’s story of
hurt as one’s own and then move to connect that story with another story of hurt is difficult, but as Morrison argues through juxtaposed content in both texts, very necessary. Morrison’s argument for undergirding a journey of self imaginatively must stake itself in community -- where other journeys from hurt can meet, revise, and correct history together. The riddle of history is always a puzzle of absence exceeding presence. But creative engagements with those very absences where those absences are housed (the archive) forge some traction in making those absences labor towards meaning. This is the dare presented to history’s meaning-makers and a dare that must be taken together -- Paul D articulates the necessity of doing exactly this at the closing of Beloved by stating that “we are our best thing” (Morrison 273).
Works Cited


