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A Literary Patchwork Crazy Quilt: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Sunny Falling-rain

This paper suggests that Toni Morrison used the structure and form of the crazy quilt as a literary approach in her award-winning novel Beloved. The elements of the crazy quilt have a literary counterpart in the novel. The concept of craziness has multiple meanings in quilts and in her novel.

Morrison may have created a literary crazy quilt in order to convey meaning that could not be conveyed in any other way. Quilters know the healing power that quilts possess. By creating a novel in the form of a quilt, the author gave the novel the qualities and the power of the quilt to warm and to comfort and to remind us of our roots–to form connections to others and to the past. The novel as quilt enables the author to "lay to rest" an otherwise unspeakable story about a period of American history that does not rest well.

> "At times you have to begin with pain
> because it calls out the loudest."[1]
>
> Diane Rusnak

> "How can I say things that are pictures?"[2]
>
> Toni Morrison

I first read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* shortly after its publication in 1987. About that time I had also started to learn how to make quilts and to study books about them. I read a copy of

Who'd A Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking, also published in 1987.[3] Noticing the quilt imagery and references to quilts and colors in *Beloved,* I wondered if the novel might not be structured like a quilt, but I put the notion in the back of my mind. As time went on, however, and my knowledge about quilts and of quilting increased, the wondering kept nagging at me. I remembered the red ribbon most distinctly. The memory of a bit of red ribbon Stamp Paid had found floating in the river and that he had carried in his pocket, as a reminder, for many years, resulted in the writing of this paper.

Something a friend had said about being unable to read *Beloved* also nagged at me. She had started it and put it down unread, unable to get back into the story, because she could not follow the structure. Actually, she could not *find* the structure. While working on this paper, I told her my theory that *Beloved* is a literary patchwork crazy quilt. She replied, "Now I know why I couldn't read it."[4]

As I began to reread the novel to find out if my theory had any justification, I soon became convinced that Toni Morrison had indeed deliberately used quilt imagery, symbolism, and structure in the novel. The more I read, however, the more depth and breadth I found to the significance of the novel as quilt–in particular the crazy quilt. Morrison *literarily* created a patchwork crazy quilt. Every component of the crazy quilt has a counterpart in the novel. The range of literary techniques used to develop the novel as a crazy quilt includes direct statements about quilts, colors, fabrics, and quilting, and their meaning in the lives of the characters. But the author also created very subtle techniques to imitate quilting structures, techniques which I believe could only have been noticed by someone knowledgeable about quilting–someone looking for structures reminiscent of the crazy quilt.

Toni Morrison, an African-American woman, published *Beloved,* her fifth novel, in1987. In December 1993 she received the Nobel Prize for Literature. She has been highly acclaimed as a writer on the international level for many years. This novel takes place in Ohio, the state of her birth. The central event of

the novel is a historical event. Toni Morrison found an account of an escaped slave woman killing her infant daughter by cutting the neck of the child with a saw. The mother killed her own offspring to prevent the child from being taken into a life of slavery.

Giving a synopsis of this novel is difficult. The narrative of the novel does not follow a chronological sequence. As the author stated through the words of one of the characters, "How can I say things that are pictures?"[5] The novel begins in 1873, eighteen years after the killing of Sethe's third child, her first daughter. Sethe also had a fourth child, a daughter named Denver, who is the only child still living with her in 1873. The author never reveals the birth name of the dead child. When the deceased child later appears as a young woman embodied in the flesh, she calls herself Beloved. For eighteen years, Sethe and her surviving daughter, Denver, had lived in the same house. Sethe's two oldest children, the boys Howard and Buglar, had run away to escape the strange hauntings of the house. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, had lived with them until her death from a broken heart several years earlier. Paul D, one of the former slaves from the Sweet Home Plantation, had spent the last eighteen years on the run, until he finally finds Sethe's home. He had never forgotten the young woman he had known on the plantation. When he finally locates her, he does not know that she had killed her own child. Although she had been arrested, Sethe was later released from jail as a result of actions taken on her behalf by the local abolitionist society. One of the influential members of the society, Mr. Bodwin, had found her a job as a cook and had provided the house for little or no rent.

Denver had been a newborn infant, twenty-eight days old, on the day that her sister was killed. Denver had been born in the woods the day after her mother had run away from Sweet Home. Sethe's three older children, the two boys, Howard and Buglar, and the crawling-already baby girl who later appears as Beloved, had already been taken across the Ohio River to safety. They were taken to the house where their grandmother, Baby Suggs, was living. Baby Suggs's freedom had been purchased

by her son Halle, with money he had earned by working on his only day off for a neighboring plantation. Halle had disappeared on the day of the planned escape. After seeing the three children safely into the hands of a stranger working on the underground railroad, Sethe, about to go into labor with Denver, had stayed behind to try to find her husband. Instead, her breast milk for the crawling- already baby had been forcibly taken and her back had been lashed to a pulp. That night, she managed to escape alone.

Seriously wounded and pregnant, Sethe collapsed in the hills, unable to walk any further. A young white woman named Amy Denver chanced upon her. She massaged Sethe's swollen feet, treated her open wounds, and guided her to the river's edge where she helped deliver the infant, whom Sethe named Denver after the young woman. The next day, Sethe came upon Stamp Paid, fishing on the Kentucky side of the river. Stamp is a free man who helped other slaves to escape. He is also a friend of Baby Suggs. He rowed Sethe and Denver safely across the river into freedom.

When Paul D arrives, he and Sethe strike up a romantic relationship as soon as they see each other again. But Paul D does not know that the house that Sethe and Denver live in is haunted by the crawling-already baby's ghost. Paul D reacts to the spiteful antics by breaking up the house to chase it away. But the ghost, still longing to be with her mother, reappears as a young woman calling herself Beloved and moves herself right back in with the family.

Denver happily recognizes the young woman as her sister. But Sethe takes longer to recognize her daughter, only after Beloved manages to move Paul D out of the house. Stamp Paid finally tells Paul D about the killing, then regrets doing so. Denver tries to protect her sister and her mother until she realizes that she needs the help of the community to save her mother from the despair and the grief engendered by the angry, spiteful Beloved. Denver, who has been living a life of isolation, reaches out for help from the neighbors. Denver gets two jobs, becomes

able to support her mother, and reintegrates herself with the community.

Paul D had tried to forget the horrors of slavery. Learning of Sethe's tragedy reminds him of his own past, and he begins to understand how Sethe could have been motivated to perform an act of unthinkable desperation. After a period of self-reflection, he returns to Sethe for the sake of providing and receiving love and mutual support.

The community that had ruefully separated itself from Sethe at the time of the killing finally returns to her aid. At the moment the women gather together to prevent Sethe from attacking Mr. Bodwin, the kindly old man who had over the years assisted first Baby Suggs, then Sethe, and finally Denver, the ghost of Beloved vanishes.

Only after spending many hours rereading and pondering the novel did some of the more intricate layers of quilterly imagery reveal themselves to my inner vision. I began to actually see the novel as if looking at a crazy quilt. One insight came to me as richly as a dawning sunrise. When Denver, out of fear and desperation leaves the shelter of home to seek help, she walks down Bluestone Road. As she walks along, she passes four houses:

> . . . sitting close together in a line like wrens. The first house had two steps and a rocking chair on the porch; the second had three steps, a broom propped on the porch beam, two broken chairs and a clump of forsythia at the side. . . . The third house had yellow shutters on its two front windows and pot after pot of green leaves with white hearts or red. . . . At the fourth house the buds of a sycamore tree had rained down on the roof. . . . Next was a tiny fenced plot with a cow in it.[6]

This description, detailed with colors and shapes and images suggests a row of House blocks or Log Cabin blocks, classic American quilt patterns. The images burst with merry colors and detailed images of every day objects–images commonly embroidered, or appliqued, and sometimes painted on crazy quilts.[7] A tiny fenced plot–look again and see a tiny patch of green fabric embroidered with a fancy stitch. Forsythia–see it

radiantly in bloom and the mind's eye will see more yellow, without the adjective to name the color.

The novel, though a work of fiction, is based upon an account of a historical event. The action of a mother killing her own child seems unthinkable, even unspeakable. Morrison concludes the novel by writing, "It was not a story to pass on. . . . This is not a story to pass on."[8] So, how does an author write about the unthinkable and unspeakable? To write about the single event means to write about the experience of slavery. To write about the experience of slavery means to write about the American experience. To write about the American experience as experienced in everyday life by women would not be complete without writing about quilting. By writing the novel as patchwork, Morrison pieces in fragments of history.

Just a week before I submitted my original draft of this paper to the American Quilt Study Group, I learned that the banner quilt on display in the lobby of the Whitney Museum in 1971 had an unusual design. Jonathan Holstein had decided to name the quilt design Circles and Crosses. He described the quilt as "in many ways very bizarre for a bed cover." The design is unique, the maker unknown. It was found in an antique shop in Denver, Colorado.[9]

When Sethe was a little girl, her mother showed her the brand that identified who she was:

> She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. . . . If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark."[10]

Elements of The Crazy Quilt

In Penny McMorris's *Crazy Quilts*, a picture of an antique crazy quilt made of everyday fabrics–cottons and wools in creams and tans and blacks, with a few scraps of red and blue–has the phrase

"Think of Me" embroidered in the center.[11] This quilt looks to me like the quilt that I see created by the novel. The novel as quilt also resembles the wool quilt made by Mimi Thompson Perkins in the "Always There" exhibit.[12]

The novel begins in 1873, just at the beginning of the greatest popularity of the crazy quilt, 1876 to 1900.[13] This period of time has been also noted for a dearth of African-American quilts.[14] After 1874, silk manufactured in the United States became available, helping to support the rage for crazy quilts made from fancy dress fabrics, satins and silks and velvets. Such pricey dry goods might have been rare in the homes of poor black women, but they were obtainable and snippets of these fancy items sometimes appear in country quilts primarily made of wool, cottons, muslin, flannel, and flour sacking.[15]

In the novel, the character Amy goes to great lengths to describe such a fancy fabric, velvet, to Sethe. Amy dreams of finding her way to Boston to get herself some carmine velvet. In Boston, she would be able to find velvet in just about any color. If Amy knew how to read, she might have learned the word from mail-order ads for fancy fabrics with names for colors like gendarm, chandron, garnet, reseda, terra cotta, or shrimp.[16] If Sethe had known how to read, she might have known a name for the "rose with yellow in it" color of the calico print that Sethe's owner, Mrs. Garner, had given her.[17]

Crazy quilts, some theories say, were made as busywork by idle but wealthy women to keep them from going crazy for lack of any meaningful occupation. But even quilts made by the less well to do for everyday use were stitched to preserve one's sanity–as a form of creative expression after a long day of back-breaking and mind-dulling chores.[18]

But naturally, quilts were and are made for many other compelling reasons. They were also made to serve as a framework to preserve fabrics charged with precious memories. Just a tiny bit of a scrap of fabric from a child's dress or a man's shirt can conjure up a whole heap of memories of that person. To literally surround one's self with a whole quilt patched from tiny familiar fragments warms one on a physical level, and comforts

one on the spiritual side. Quilts serve us in profound and mysterious ways. The novel *Beloved* also serves as a framework to preserve fragments of memories and events. It also serves to warm the soul and to reconnect the reader to a great many tangible and intangible things. The novel, *Beloved*, as a quilt, heals profoundly in ways mere words on a page could not.

Crazy

Like quilts with their multiple layers, a definition of the word crazy has multiple meanings. Crazy can be defined as "odd, bizarre, irregular, strange, or unusual." Penny McMorris writes that the crazy quilt has been rumored to have originated among inmates of insane asylums.[19] Toni Morrison makes a direct reference to a lunatic asylum: "If the whitepeople of Cincinnati had allowed Negroes into their lunatic asylum they could have found candidates in 124."[20]

The word crazy appears repeatedly throughout *Beloved.* Nearly every character refers to him or herself or to someone else as crazy, or as not crazy. Paul D reflects: "The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind." Denver dreams of having talks with Beloved, "Sweet, crazy conversations full of half sentences, daydreams and misunderstandings more thrilling than understanding could ever be." Paul D thinks of Denver and Beloved as "two crazy girls." Sethe's husband Halle went crazy after having to watch in silence while her baby's milk was stolen from her nursing breasts. Sethe affectionately calls Paul D a "crazy-headed man" when he talked of wanting her pregnant. Then, she calls Beloved a "crazy girl" when she steps out in the snow, without a shawl, to put one on Sethe.[21]

But the wisdom of Stamp Paid declares that Sethe is not crazy: "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter." This statement implies the craziness of the institution of slavery and the social context that deemed slavery

justified. The act of a mother killing her own child in order to save its life, is an act of insanity–or is it? For Sethe, "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. . . . As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered." Sethe wonders to herself, "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she?" And Paul D, discussing Sethe's attempted attack on Mr. Bodwin, concludes that "That woman is crazy. Crazy." When Stamp Paid replies, "Yeah, well, ain't we all?" The absurdity of their lives becomes clear and results in a final resolution.[22]

Crazy can also be defined as odd shaped, "crazed" as cracked glaze, irregularly broken up, like cracked ice, or chunks of ore broken into smaller pieces in a crazing mill.[23] This definition relates to many elements of the novel, too. In the first paragraph, a "mirror shatters," creating a direct allusion to the fragmented shapes of fabric scraps used to make crazy quilts. The first paragraph opens with "124 was spiteful." The house at 124 Bluestone Road is not only haunted, but is odd-shaped and irregularly broken up. The "second-story windows of that house had been placed in the pitched ceiling and not the walls" so that the light from the sky came into the room. Also, Baby Suggs had blocked the back entrance to the house and moved the kitchen indoors–an irregular practice at that time and locality. The former cooking shed out back had become the woodshed instead, and it had irregular cracks in the lathing that admitted fractured patches of sunlight, which the author names "cracklights."[24]

The images of cracked, odd-shaped, and fragmented objects extend beyond the images in the house structure to other elements in the novel. Denver had hidden a bottle of cologne in her secret hiding place "among the boxwood until it froze and cracked." And the dress Sethe created for her first wedding day with Halle was a crazy hodge podge of household textiles borrowed on the sly from Mrs. Garner–but even the description of the dress comes to the reader in fragments, just little hints and glimpses that gradually merge into a complete image. The brief descriptive passage, "Sethe made a dress on the sly and Halle hung his hitching rope from a nail on the wall of her cabin," is

all that the author reveals, for the time being.[25] Later, Sethe fully describes the dress:

> I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe. The top was from two pillow cases in her mending basket. The front of the skirt was a dresser scarf a candle fell on and burnt a hole in, and one of her old sashes we used to test the flatiron on. Now the back was a problem for the longest time. Seem like I couldn't find a thing that wouldn't be missed right away. Because I had to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were. . . . Finally I took the mosquito netting from a nail out the barn. We used it to strain jelly through. . . . I tacked it on for the back of the skirt. And there I was, in the worst-looking gown you could imagine. Only my wool shawl kept me from looking like a haint peddling.[26]

The author used the literary technique of breaking up a descriptive reference several times. Sethe used to "bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner's kitchen every day just to be able to work in it." This brief mention of "a few yellow flowers on the table" later re-emerges in a memory by Beloved: "Sethe is the one that picked the flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where we sleep."[27]

The disjointed and fragmented nature of the ideas, objects, and descriptions in the novel also characterizes the narrative structure of the work. The novel was written with more than one narrative voice. The narrative slips imperceptively from one voice to another, often within the same sentence. Sometimes it slips from dialogue into description and back again.

The chapters written from Beloved's point of view move into a stream of consciousness technique. For example, an omniscient narrator describes Denver telling Beloved Sethe's story about Denver's birth. She remembers, "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." Then the narration moves into a painterly description of "the quick-change weather up in those hills–cool at night, hot in the day, sudden fog." Then the reader

is in Sethe's mind: "How recklessly she behaved with this white-girl–;" then taken back in time to the dialogue between Sethe and Amy: "'You ain't got no business walking round these hills, miss.' 'Looka here who's talking. I got more business here 'n you got,'" Amy answers.[28]

Individual chapters, more like quilt block samplers than standard book chapters, also follow different literary structures–sometimes song, sometimes poetry. Baby Suggs has a chapter, Denver has a chapter, and Beloved has several chapters in various styles. The past at Sweet Home becomes patched in with the present at 124 Bluestone Road. The past at Bluestone Road becomes patched in with its suddenly revived present.

Not just physical objects, descriptive passages, and the narrative in this novel are broken up. The characters think of themselves as being disjoined and long to be re-joined. Sethe feels confused after Paul D's appearance. She "needed to get up from there, go downstairs and *piece it all* back together." In Beloved's mental ramblings, she dreams of the desire to join with her mother: "I am looking for the join." As spirit, she has no boundaries. Where her presence begins and ends cannot be defined. After she loses a baby tooth, "an odd fragment," Beloved fears that as a physical being she will "fly apart. . . find herself in pieces." She thinks:

> I am going to be in pieces . . . there is no one to want me to say me my name. . . I see her face which is mine . . . we are in the diamonds which are her earrings now . . . I am looking for the join . . . she is my face smiling at me . . . now we can join.[29]

Mr. Garner's death causes the carefully balanced, though disfunctional, life of Sweet Home, which he owned, to disintegrate: "Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces. Now ain't that slavery or what is it?" The plans to escape fell apart, too. All the men from Sweet Home died, dispersed, or went crazy. Paul D's life after Sweet Home until his reappearance at 124 Bluestone Road reads as a series of fragmented experiences:

> After [Alfred, Georgia] the Cherokee pointed and sent him running toward blossoms, he wanted simply to move, go, pick up one

> day and be somewhere else the next. Resigned to life without aunts, cousins, children. Even a woman, until Sethe.

Paul D also longs to be joined with Sethe:

> Passing by that woman's life, getting in it and letting it get in him had set him up for this fall. Wanting to live out his life with *a whole woman* was new.[30]

The concept of "rememory," the idea that "nothing ever dies" and being re-membered, holds the key to meaning in this novel.[31] Literary critic Margaret Turner writes:

> Morrison's language is crucial in evoking the physical and material levels at which she forces us to understand the female body: Sethe 'rememories' her mother and daughter. Ashraf Rushdy notes that this term, signifying a magical anamnesis available to one not involved in the original act, is a new and useful addition to the vocabularies of both psychology and narratology.[32]

I believe that Morrison may have developed the idea of remembering out of a knowledge of patchwork. Radka Donnell's book on quilts as women's art emphasizes the emotional power of the making of the quilt. In part, she writes:

> The actual making of the quilt as a continuous piece of fabric addresses itself as a system of continuity to more than one modality, and predominantly to that of touch. This became for me, as for other women, a bridge to all from whom we felt excessively separated. In my case, that meant a bridge to my mother. . . . In pieced quilts the graphic, symbolic, and tactile aspects coincide in the evocation of the body. Put differently, they provide a *simulacrum of the mother.*[33]

Donnell's philosophy has everything to do with the work of Toni Morrison, because the separation from one's most beloved flesh and blood lies at the heart of this novel:

> . . . in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learn-

> ing that nobody stopped playing checkers, just because the *pieces* included her children.[34]

Foundation

The nature of the crazy quilt requires piecing on a foundation fabric. The bits and scraps of fabrics of all shapes–diamonds, squares, triangles, circles, fans, strips–are placed in overlapping sequences, then stitched to the foundation with fancy embroidery stitches. For the novel to imitate the crazy quilt, it must have a foundation. I believe the foundation is the home. The novel sits squarely on the home at 124 Bluestone Road. The period in which the crazy quilt was the rage can also be referred to as the late Victorian era. The home held significant meaning during that period as a "place of peace, a shelter from injury, all doubt, terror, or division." The home provided spiritual enrichment. Regardless of social class or economic status, well-being depended upon the well-maintained home. [35]

The novel opens with this blunt sentence: "124 was spiteful." For Denver, the house had become "a person rather than a structure." The house also held great meaning for Sethe:

> This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing–a shirtwaist or a sewing basket you could walk off from or give away any old time. She who had never had one but this one; she who left a dirt floor to come to this one.[36]

Even though haunted, the house serves as shelter. And it serves like a patchwork quilt–to comfort and remind. Even Mr. Bodwin, the owner of the house, kept it after he had no more need for it, allowing the women to live in it virtually rent free, just to keep it occupied because as a child he had buried some of his toys there.

The major events of the novel take place at 124. The lives of Baby Suggs and Sethe and the children shatter there, but to Sethe her "mind was homeless." In the process of healing, the house then becomes the place of reunion, the place of return to wholeness. At first:

> 124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps [Sethe] was oblivious to the loss of anything at all. . . . When she woke the house crowded in on her: there was the door . . . the white stairs . . . the corner . . . the cold room, the stove, the spite of the house itself. There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made. So, kneeling in the keeping room the morning after Paul D came, she was distracted by the *two orange squares that signaled how barren 124 really was.*[37]

The two orange squares symbolize the two run-away boys. The quilt the squares are patched into symbolizes the departed Baby Suggs, mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law. Barren, 124 serves as the blank foundation upon which Morrison patches the fragments of the shattered lives of her characters back together again. A resurgence of creativity begins after the arrival of Paul D, "up now and singing as he mended things he had broken the day before."[38]

Center

The center of the crazy quilt typically featured a special block, sometimes a square, but often a medallion or oval which framed an embroidered scene or a monogrammed phrase.[39] In *Beloved*, Grandma Baby holds the center, as a grandmother should, a place of honor. In my 1987 edition of the novel, page 137 is the exact center of the 275 pages. On that page, the resentful neighbors complain about Baby Suggs: "Why is she and hers always the center of things?" Immediately following that statement, the author paints a portrait of Baby working in her garden, hoeing the "tight soil over the roots of the pepper plants," listening, looking around for something dark that she feels on its way. She puts a bit of rue in her hat, then stands alert, "straightened . . . resting on the handle of the hoe."[40]

In a poem called *The Crazy Quilt*, the stanza referring to the center patch evokes the significance of Grandma Baby to the novel:

I am the center patch, a square
Steadfast and firm and true,
Symbolic of a fireside
Remembered well by you
Around me gathered, others flash
Their colors bright and gay,
And sometimes with each other clash
And angry moods display.

Of royal velvet I am made,
In luxury was born;
What better patch could have been laid
The center to adorn?[41]

The clearing in the woods, where Grandma Baby once held Sunday services, provides an opening with a forest frame around her, like a medallion or an oval-shaped block. In the center of the clearing, she spoke to those who gathered there from upon a large flat rock. Solid as a rock, the bedrock of the story, Grandma Baby's philosophy, as presented by Toni Morrison, forms a healing, life affirming symphony of laughter, crying, and dancing.

Hers is a philosophy of inclusion that brings together young and old, men and women. Sethe returns to this clearing, "a green blessed place," when she begins to sink into despair from the nine year absence of the touch, voice, and wisdom of Baby Suggs. For consolation, Sethe "decided to go to the clearing, back where Baby Suggs had danced in sunlight." The focus on Grandma Baby falls in the center of the novel, where Morrison wrote, "the sadness was at her center, the desolated center . . . where the self that was no self made its home."[42]

Color

If quilts could tell their own story, what would they say? Those of us who make quilts know that every quilt has a story. Those of us who ponder the marvelous beauty of antique quilts some-

times long to know the story of each quilt and each quilter. Likewise, if *Beloved* were a quilt, what would it look like?

In any quilt, crazy or not, color becomes the essential expression of the quilt. Since I propose that this novel is a literary crazy quilt, then this novel would have to be a patchwork of many colors. Any color could "work" in a crazy quilt. In *Beloved*, color indeed abounds in its full range, from black to white, from somber, dark, and dull colors, to spectacular warm carnival colors, splashing and clashing and whooping for joy.

Ordinary color words as single adjectives appear throughout the novel, as they perhaps might in any novel. By paying close attention to the colors named, and their placement, the deliberateness of their use becomes apparent. The phrase "Bluestone Road" first appears in the first paragraph with "white" and "gray" and the phrase "dead of winter." The grandmother is dead and the two boys have taken off. The quilt that warmed Baby Suggs on her death bed lacks bright, warm colors, except for two orange squares. But by the end of the novel, that quilt has been transformed. Sethe and Beloved amuse themselves by "tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt." When Paul D returns to the house to reconcile with Sethe, he finds her "lying under a quilt of merry colors . . . the quilt patched in carnival colors."[43]

Color carries meaning. Color sets the tone. Color reflects the mood. The phrase "Bluestone Road" repeats many times throughout the novel because it is a place, an address. Bluestone could also be the color of blue serge, a solid, reliable, rugged fabric; a familiar, humble country fabric, possibly used for boys' trousers.

In different "patches" of the novel, a particular color or two cluster suggestively. The color "brown" describes a variety of items. Amy has seen some "brown velvet;" Denver has a "round and brown face;" "two eyes of brown" form a rhyme in the song that Amy sings; Mrs. Garner has "wide brown eyes;" Sethe and Beloved watch the "layer of brown leaves" at the bottom of the creek; and snow falls on the "brown fields turning white." Textiles suggesting the texture of cloth include "brown stockings" and a "brown wool headcloth." The author also describes things

by words that suggest qualities of the color brown: "peachstone skin," "hazelnut man," and "spilled coffee."[44] Brown fabrics predominate in the picture of the crazy quilt on page 103 in Penny McMorris's book.[45]

White and black fabrics also appear on the quilts that I found pictured. When white and black are used to describe skin color or race, the words take on meanings associated with racism and race relations–meanings inextricably linked to the essence of this story. Miss Bodwin is described as a "whitewoman." By linking white and woman into a compound word, Morrison creates a connection with implied meaning. But when white and black describe fabric colors, historical connotations fade. Universal associations to white and black as pure color emerge–one inclusive of the full spectrum of light, one the complete absence of light. Denver sees an apparition of a "white cotton lisle" dress–presumably the ghost of Beloved attending her mother: "A white dress knelt down next to her mother." When Beloved appears embodied as herself in the flesh, she appears in an all-black dress and shiny black shoes, so shiny that they reflect light. Her "black skirt swayed from side to side" and her "eyes stretched to the limit, black as the allnight sky."[46]

The color red, so often symbolic, and so significant in quilts, also colors significant symbols of this story: the red cockscomb of the rooster Mister; Sixo's flame red tongue; Paul D's "red, red, heart;" and especially for me, the red ribbon that Stamp Paid found in the river. Stamp Paid's thoughts define the violent significance of red, its passion. In thinking about his friend, Baby Suggs, he "hoped she stuck to blue, yellow–maybe green, and never fixed on red." Sethe covered in the sticky blood of her infant daughter stands testimony to the power of life giving blood–killed on the 28th day of freedom; like the female menstral cycle, inevitable.[47]

Toni Morrison's clear and direct statements about color in the novel present a philosophy about the power of color to heal and to transform that every quiltmaker will understand intuitively:

> [Baby] used the little energy left her for pondering color.
>
> . . . winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color . . . life's principle joy. . . .
>
> Baby Suggs, holy, proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping-room bed roused once in a while by a craving for color and not for another thing. . . .
>
> Baby Suggs lay down and thought about color for the rest of her life. . . .
>
> She had exhausted blue and was well on her way to yellow. . . .
>
> Ain't nothing harmless down here–'Yes it is. Blue. That don't hurt nobody. Yellow neither.' . . .
>
> Kneeling in the 'keeping room' where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout.

The color orange and the two orange quilt squares seem to me to represent the two absent boys, Howard and Buglar. Miss Bodwin brings "oranges for the boys".[48] Words from the poem by K. E. P. Taggart provide another link to the color orange, and the association between orange and the two absent boys:

> The Orange Patch speaks:
> I'm the bright orange patch, and for me there's no match.
> I'm the type of the boys of today.
> As a banner I hung, in a ballroom when young,
> Till some sophomore stole me away.
> I'm the cling and the clang, and the whoop and the bang,
> And the old rusty pan for a drum.
> With their feet brown and bare, and with bright tousled hair,
> The orange-patch gang now come.
>
> From the large to the small, they arrive one and all,
> They're a unit on mischief ahead,
> And the pranks that they play till the end of the day
> Make you wish that you surely were dead.

> But they're wonderful boys, and in spite of their noise
> A bright spot in humanity's plan;
> And there's more than one lad, whose surroundings were bad,
> Who has made a most excellent man.[49]

The following description by Morrison of the quilt in the keeping room could describe the quilt illustrated on page 103 in *Crazy Quilts* by Penny McMorris:

> There wasn't any [color] except for two orange squares that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate colored, the floor earth brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool–the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild–like life in the raw.[50]

The following quotations from the novel speak eloquently of the author's message about the meaning of color:

> Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. Every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup, meat and all the rest. And she could not remember remembering a molly apple or a yellow squash. Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. *There was something wrong with that.* It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it. [51][emphasis added.]

That was the last of it until Beloved returned, "talking about colors." Morrison writes:

> Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, *asking questions about the color of things* and their size, her downright craving to know, *Denver began to see what she was saying* and not just to hear it: . . . [Sethe] is not so afraid at night because

> she is the color of it. . . . Denver was seeing it now and feeling it–through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by *giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her–and a heartbeat.* The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. The dark quilt with two orange patches was there with them because Beloved wanted it near her when she slept. It was smelling like grass and feeling like hands–the unrested hands of busy women: dry, warm, prickly.[52][emphasis added.]

So many uses of color words and objects representing the essence of colors abound in the novel that to reread it with an eye to the use of color will dazzle the mind's eye. To me, it seems like the experience of putting on those red and blue cellophane glasses at a 3-D movie for the first time. Suddenly, the images pop out at you like real life. I want to point out the way that Sethe describes her baby girl's headstone: "pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. . . . dawn-colored stone studded with star chips. . . . Her pinkish headstone was the last color I recall. . . ."[53] This description, so expressive of a mother's devotion, reminds me of the pink and white calico prints often used in antique quilts of this era, particularly those recording the birthdates of children.[54] To me, one of the most touching statements in the novel expressing the power of color to carry meaning comes from Sethe's thoughts during the happy time just after she learns that Beloved is her daughter: "Now I know why Baby Suggs pondered color her last years. She never had time to see, let alone enjoy it before."[55]

Images/Embroidery

Crazy quilts often included embroidered or appliqued scenes and objects of everyday use: scenes from nature, insects, flowers, birds, plants, household items, and wild or domestic ani-

mals.[56] *Beloved*'s pages burst with examples of every item on the list. Toni Morrison embroiders one of these scenes just after the birth of Denver:

> Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river's edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects–but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of the future–certain it will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself.
>
> On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue.[57]

The preceding tranquil scene contrasts greatly with the description of the rooster, Mister. A far more sinister scene, yet just as much a part of the landscape:

> Yeah, he was hateful all right. Bloody, too, and evil. Crooked feet flapping. Comb as big as my hand and some kind of red. He sat right there on the tub looking at me. I swear he smiled. . . . Mister, he looked so . . . free.[58]

In addition to images of roosters and other barnyard stock, crazy quilts sometimes displayed exotic and bizarre images, of such things as elephants, giraffes, spiders, and toads. Some fabric designs in this era included "hieroglyphics, chimeras, flying dragons, or impossible birds and fishes."[59] The novel also has some exotic images. Toni Morrison refers to the Klan as "the dragon [that] swam the Ohio [river] at will." Sethe thinks of the kicking infant during labor as "the little antelope." She thinks of herself as a snake in the grass when discovered by Amy, and the mating turtles conjure up a bizarre image.[60] The snake and the tortoise possess meaning in African folklore and mysticism.[61] Perhaps the most exotic image in the novel is that of a young woman glimpsed "cutting through the woods, naked with fish for hair."[62]

Embellishments

Another marvelous feature of the crazy quilt, and the one most delightfully used to embellish the novel, were the "tassels, ribbons, stuffed work, beads, fabric, thread, lace, and paint, taxidermy or braid" sometimes added to the surface of crazy quilts.[63] In a "confusion of tassels," Halle and Sethe, making love for the first time, cause the "corn stalks to dance." Stamp Paid keeps the red ribbon he found in the river. Beloved adores Sethe's "sharp earrings," "the pair of crystal earrings," earrings that reappear several times in the novel. Beloved asked Sethe to "tell me your diamonds" and "Sethe explained the crystal that once hung from her ears." Paul's heart became a rusted "tobacco tin." Mr. Bodwin as a young child buried his "box of tin soldiers [and a] watch chain with no watch" behind the house on Bluestone road. Ominously, the "neck jewelry," the three-pronged neck harness that Schoolteacher, the overseer, forced Paul D to wear like a beast of burden, represents an element from the history of slavery. Used like an embellishment, it becomes a key to meaning in the novel. Sethe "never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame. . . . Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers."[64]

Embellishments in the novel more easily recognized as artifacts belonging to the history of quilting are the things that Sethe and Beloved rejoice in, the things that they used to cover the "entire railing of the white stairs . . . ribbons, bows, and bouquets." Sethe spent her life savings "to feed themselves with fancy food and decorate themselves with ribbon and dress goods . . . yellow ribbon, shiny buttons and bits of black lace."[65]

Fabrics

Naturally, every quilt, crazy or not, is composed of fabric of one sort or another. Fashionable crazy quilts incorporated every kind of fancy fabric in every kind of pattern: plaids, stripes, checks,

watered taffeta, silk, satin, corduroy, velvet, brocade, lisle, cotton, and wool. The poor used whatever scraps were available: "canvas, cardboard, and muslin . . . old waists, discarded flounces, babies' sashes, gentlemen's neckties."[66]

Toni Morrison used words and phrases throughout her novel to indicate various types of cloth: "blue handkerchief," "a piece of clean sheeting," "piece of muslin," "china silk," "potato sack," "white rag," "bright clothes with blue stripes and sassy prints," etc. The author also named various garments to indicate fabrics: "the dress was a good wool castoff," and "another good wool shawl for Baby Suggs."[67] But the naming of fabrics does more than suggest the material of a quilt. The use of so many different fabrics adds to the meaning of the novel:

> There was this piece of goods Mrs. Garner gave me. Calico. Stripes it had with little flowers in between. 'Bout a yard–not enough for more'n a head tie. But I had been wanting to make a shift for my girl with it. Had the prettiest colors. I don't even know what you call that color: a rose but with yellow in it. For the longest time I been meaning to make it for her and do you know like a fool I left it behind? No more than a yard, and I kept putting it off because I was tired or didn't have the time. So when I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Suggs had. Well, all I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of 'em live under schoolteacher. That was out.[68]

The author also used descriptions that merely suggest the qualities and patterns of fabrics. The description of the wallpaper in the house at 124 resembles a calico print: "blue and white wallpaper . . . discreet flecks of yellow sprinkled among a blizzard of snowdrops all backed by blue."[69]

Some of the stuffing materials listed by McMorris that were used by the poor to fill the layers of their quilts include everything from feathers, to leaves, cornhusks, cattail down, ends of yarn, or odd bits of cloth.[70] With a quilter's eye for detail, Morrison included a line in the novel that itemized some of these things and more that served as bedding for Paul D, first as a slave,

then during his years of wandering. He had spent the greater part of his life sleeping on "soil, grass, mud, shucking, leaves, hay, cobs, seashells." The first time he sleeps on clean "white cotton sheets" moves him so deeply that he crawls into bed with "thankful tears." He is more grateful for the sheets than he is for the woman who invited him to share the bed.[71]

Stitches

A quilt is not finished until the top, the batting, and the backing are quilted. The crazy quilt requires that the top fabrics be carefully stitched to a foundation, then embellished. Many of the hundreds of embroidery stitches used to piece the scraps together are known by names evocative of the images that the stitches resemble. Embroidery stitches are named for leaves, feathers, knots, rings and circles, stairs, flowers, insects–all names of everyday objects and things found in nature–all of which are named or implied in the novel.

A couple of names for filling stitches are the trellis stitch and the basket stitch. Sethe puts the crawling-already baby in a basket under the grape arbor, where flies land on her face. An arbor is another name for a trellis and the fly is another name for a stitch.[72]

Outline stitches, such as the chain stitch, bring to mind the one thousand feet of chain connecting the prisoners who chain-danced over the fields. The cord stitch resembles Halle's rope belt hung on the wall on his and Sethe's bedding day. The stairs which Sethe had painted white so her crawling-already baby could "see her way to the top" are named over and over again in the novel. To me the stairs most distinctively represent the stitching used to delineate fabrics on the crazy quilt. The author emphasizes the whiteness of the stairs by describing them as "glistening," "lily white," "ghost-white," "luminous," and "lightening" white–beautiful.[73]

Other names for embroidery stitches echo other words, con-

cepts, and images in the novel: knotted, reverse, magic, open, rosette, whipped, beaded, blanket, braid, plaited, back stitch–crossed, double, threaded, cord, double running, eyelet hole, line, and split.[74]

I also believe that the author created sequences of word stitches which form a dense linguistic line of meaning. These word strings have a tactile, textural quality to them. One of these includes the inventory of flowering trees that Paul D follows to guide his way north:

> So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit.[75]

Two other short sets of words strung together in a line include the insects which attack Stamp Paid while he is picking blackberries: "mosquitoes, bees, hornets, wasps and the meanest lady spiders in the state," and a listing of Stamp Paid's various occupations: "agent, fisherman, boatman, tracker, savior, spy." Still other word stitches include the lists of foods at the potluck dinner, household tasks, farmyard tasks, and the things that "white-people" found interesting enough about black people to publish in the newspapers.[76]

The designs formed by quilting stitches also have a counterpart in the novel:

> Sethe knew that the circle 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. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds *stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair* and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. *Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful,* and carried, *pushed, dragged them through the veil,*

> out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. . . . *Circling, circling,* now she was gnawing something else instead of *getting to the point.*[77] [emphasis added]

These literary stitches securely connect the fabric of history and the fabric of nature to the fabric of the novel.

Conclusion

The novel *Beloved* resembles a crazy patchwork quilt, in form and in function. In the last block of the novel, Toni Morrison repeats the phrase, "It was not a story to pass on. . . . This is not a story to pass on." A quilt, however, can be passed on.[78] By making a quilt, "It" can finally be laid to rest–"It" being the ghost baby of the novel, Beloved, and the historical baby, all the other ghost babies, and all the unnamed, unknown lost men, women and children from the period of slavery. All can be laid to rest, put to rest, but not forgotten.

When Stamp Paid found the red ribbon floating in the river, it had been tied around a bit of scalp and tight curly hair. I had forgotten that part of the story after my first reading of the novel, so many years ago. Stamp Paid had saved the ribbon as a reminder. By the end of the story, he had worried "his scrap of ribbon to shreds." Every time he approaches the house at 124 to attempt to apologize to Sethe for having scared Paul D away, he hears voices:

> This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons.
>
> What a roaring.[79]

All of the silenced voices become part of the whole because of this novel–their shattered lives remain fragmented like the scraps in old quilts, with all the mysteries of their unknown makers, but in this novel each life is re-membered in the very special way that only a quiltmaker could have accomplished. The quiltmaker patches fragments back together again with love, with

patience, with time, one stitch at a time. The quiltmaker cherishes the smallest useless bit of fabric and makes it part of the larger whole. A quiltmaker re-members.

Toni Morrison, recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, brings the private, intimate worlds of all the anonymous quiltmakers and all their untold stories so painstakingly stitched into their everyday quilts into the literary fold. Our great quilt heritage merges with our great literary heritage in this novel. The woman writer becomes one with the quiltmakers. The quiltmakers become one with the woman writer. Cuesta Benberry proposed that "if quiltmaking had permeated the black family structure to the extent we believed it had, would it not manifest itself in black arts and literature?" Benberry calls for research that will provide recognition of "those multitudes of black quiltmakers whose works have largely gone unrecorded."[80] This novel affirms the works of African-American quilters by affirming the significance of quilting in their lives. This novel also gives testimony to reasons for the dearth of surviving African-American quilts from this period of American history.

How many of us know of the deep, profoundly felt, wordless stories that quilts reveal? The wordless power of fabric constructions made by hand and with heart reaches the depth of the soul. The silent expressions of color and shape and texture and form create an international and timeless language of the spirit.

Toni Morrison, master storyteller, deserves recognition for her intimate knowledge of quilting as well as for her powerful writing. She created a literary crazy quilt in order to convey meaning that could not be conveyed in any other way. Quilters know the healing power that quilts possess. By creating a quilt in the form of a novel, the novel takes on the qualities and the power of the quilt to warm and to comfort and to remind all of us of our roots–to form connections to all others and to the past. The novel as quilt enables the author to lay to rest an otherwise unspeakable story about an incident and a period of American history that does not rest well.

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