The American South, a landscape of contradiction and continuity, is cast as a repository of cultural memory in twentieth-century African American literature. Many writers recuperate the South as a site of reconnection with ancestral history as this symbolic geography bears witness to what Jean Toomer labels the “pain and the beauty” of African American history. Frank Shelton amplifies on the paradoxical construct of the South:

The dichotomy between kinship with the Southern land and the oppression blacks experienced on that land informs the black Southern version of the pastoral. . . . it seems clear that, for many current black writers (Southern and non-Southern alike), unlike white Southern writers, the meaning of life is to be found through forging a personal connection with Southern history, a history that involves enslavement, prejudice, and racism but nevertheless strengthens individuals through offering them a relationship with the land and a place in a community of people nurtured by a pastoral environment. (13, 28-29)

Carolyn Jones has added to this discussion, eloquently exploring the configuration of the South as a site of violence and labor which African Americans wrested as a homeland:

Black Americans shaped the landscape of the American South. The houses that were built, the human beings that were nurtured in them; the forests that were cleared, and the crops that were planted and harvested were all tended by Black hands and formed by African cultural practices, technologies and sensibilities. The landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became, for the most part, neither legally nor economically their own, but became spiritually their own through their own labor and under the most difficult of circumstances. (37)

In this way, numerous critics have articulated the South as a complex geography of home and exile: Baraka labels the “Black South” a “homeland” and “the scene of the crime” (143, 142); Atkinson and Page remark on the “joy and shame” of the South (97); Yaeger considers the Southland “as ancestral torture chamber and as ancestral home” (56); Fultz argues that, “for many African Americans, the South remains a place of comfort and contradiction—a place to turn toward and a place to turn from” (79); and Beavers contends that for the men in Toni Morrison’s fiction, the South is a “place of origin and curse” (61).

Farah Jasmine Griffin’s explication of Billie Holiday’s song “Strange Fruit” is particularly fitting for this analysis:

Her portrayal of the naturally beautiful “pastoral South,” marred by the realities of burning black bodies, gives meaning and emotion to the descriptions written by the novelists. . . . Holiday places the black body at the very center of the pastoral. Its blood nourishes the fertile earth which in life it tilled. (15-16)

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For Griffin, Holiday’s insistence on placing the lynched and burned black body in the pastoral landscape disrupts spurious constructs of the South as Arcadia. Griffin seemingly intends to applaud Holiday for forcing a recognition of the South’s violence; however, Griffin’s language has larger implications for this study. For my purposes, “placing the black body in the very center of the pastoral” results in a revision of the American Southern pastoral genre itself.

While, in the African American pastoral, this reasserted black body is the enslaved body—lynched, maimed, tortured, and abused by racism and its institutionalized powers—it is also the ancestral body, with its accompanying folk culture and practices, spirituality, community, and kinship networks. Ernest Gaines implicitly affirms the conceptual model of this analysis: “I think that’s what I have in my writing—you have that pastoral, agrarian thing—the fields, and the streams and the trees, and all that sort of thing, but then there’s that other thing going on all the time” (“Interview” 318). Gaines’s literature represents a profoundly reworked and revised American Southern pastoral in which “that other thing”—which implicitly encompasses slavery, racism, social protest, and resistance—is as endemic to the South as are the fields, streams, and trees.

In “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison posits a useful paradigm for the African American pastoral tradition that highlights physical place as a seat of cultural memory:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (119)

One of the images offered by this passage is that of the writer inherently connected to a past that is imprinted in a particular time and place. The relationship that emerges between author and place is one of reciprocity: The geography is contextualized within cultural narratives, and the authors, through memory, unearth the stories held in that historic space.

Morrison’s metaphorical flooding also introduces water as a crucial geographical marker. Water, as a designation of the “original place,” suggests a shared historic origin, beginning with the Middle Passage. The African American pastoral is connected to the material conditions of slavery and its aftermath, and as a result it is reasonable to conclude that this “original place” encompasses what Benston calls “the debasing ground of the Middle Passage and slavery” (151). The African American pastoral assumes the inscription of that fluid site, with its unspeakable horror, onto the Southern landscape.

As Carl Pedersen posits, “For African Americans the Atlantic was a different kind of space. Instead of a breach separating past from present, it constituted a transformative Middle Passage where an African past and the American future, one in danger of fading from memory, the other imposing its hegemonic will, were constantly in conflict over contested spheres of power” (42). In this way, the Middle Passage can be seen as a locus of hybrid cultural identity for African Americans. As Deborah McDowell states, “From the moment of contact, those cultures began a process of synthesis in which the artifacts, the belief systems, the assumptions of each became inextricably entwined with the other, and it is sometimes hard to know where the one stops and the other starts” (Christian, McDowell and McKay 209). Similarly, Claudine
Raynaud characterizes the Middle Passage as a liminal space: “The Middle Passage, this inevitable progress—drifting?—from a lost origin to a forced destination, is a space of in-betweeness, the place of the motion from a home to hell, from a lost homeland to (in) hospitable lands that must become home” (71). Thus, the transatlantic voyage is inherent in the African American pastoral, as this literary tradition bears witness to the truncated narratives of the Middle Passage, the brutal practices of slavery, and the paradoxical configuration of the South through myth and memory.

The navigation of the Middle Passage was brutal for the Africans who endured this voyage to the “New World.” The slave ships, carrying human cargo far beyond their capacity, provide an important beginning for locating burial sites. In addition to the fact that gravesites are structures that reveal merely the trace of ancestors through bodily remains, African American graves, from the beginning, evoke invisibility. These “first burials” into a “watery grave,” as Wright and Hughes characterize them, occurred as a result of rampant disease, inhume living conditions, and suicide aboard the sea vessels. This is a significant aspect of the history of burials, as some estimates suggest that the mortality rate on these ships exceeded fifty percent (Wright and Hughes 3).

It is tenable to employ the Middle Passage as an extended metaphor for the internment of African American enslaved populations in the South. Beginning with the slave ship voyages and continuing to the post-Reconstruction period, the burials accorded to enslaved African peoples were often characterized by indifference and expediency. The waters of the Atlantic Ocean flowing from the tributaries of the South expand this site of death to America. Indeed, the slaveholders’ penchant for “the convenient disposal of slave corpses by throwing them into the river” (Kruger-Kahloula, “On the Wrong” 142) echoes the burial practices of the Middle Passage, further inscribing the water as a place of death and beginning—a fluid boundary that both disrupts and connects.

The material history of death in the South, with its juxtaposition of enslaved peoples struggling to maintain their honored rituals and the dominant culture’s violent dismissal of African cultural practices further indicates the complexity of the African American pastoral. The Middle Passage is a continuum that connects Africa to America, and thus funerary rituals are one of many legacies that survived this voyage. African American grave decorations are a particular African resonance. Many of the “offerings” at gravesites are “associated with water or can be interpreted as water symbols, and include pitchers, tumblers, cups, bottles and sea shells” (Vlach 143). Vlach explicates the predominance of water imagery in African American cemeteries: “When placed on top of the grave they create an image of a river bottom, the environment in African belief under which the realm of the dead is located.” Therefore, it is not only the Middle Passage that suggests water burials, but a belief of the Kongo religion that ancestors “inhabit villages of the dead located under river beds or lake bottoms” (Vlach 143).

The interrelationship between the ancestors and the community is a philosophical underpinning of many African religions; as a result, African rituals surrounding the dead are quite extensive. Elaborate grave decorations are one symbol of this honor. The continuation of these practices after emancipation indicates that these customs survived slavery, despite the fact that during those years such rituals would have been thwarted entirely or practiced subversively. Because of the obvious import of these religious traditions, the denial of proper funerary rites—or even a recognized burial—amounted to a repudiation of the sacred.

During the antebellum period, funeral and burial rituals varied extensively, largely as a result of the slave
master’s will. Research suggests that some enslaved peoples were permitted control over burial practices of their family and friends; as a result, African funerary rites were administered in many such situations. However, other accounts indicate that slaveholders “had to be reminded to bury their dead slaves” (Kruger-Kahloula, “On the Wrong” 142). During slavery, most African Americans were interred in scattered burial plots on the plantation grounds. The majority of these graves did not have accompanying headstones or markers of any kind. Kruger-Kahloula comments on this general refusal to mark graves: “Tombstones provide a visible and tangible proof of genealogy and history. As black people have long been dispossessed of their history, it comes as no surprise to find only a few traces of them in pre-Emancipation cemeteries” (“Homage” 317). Matthew Wilson, in examining the symbol of unmarked graves in Bradley’s The Chaneyville Incident, offers the following observation: “Where the bodies of the dead are buried is not an act of conscious evasion of the evidence of crime for the slaveholders—like the Soviets hiding the bodies of the Polish officers they killed in the Katyn Forest in 1941—but an act of not even deliberate forgetting—like burying an animal somewhere in the backyard” (102).

Identified as the ultimate act of disregard, the slave masters’ refusal to mark these lives often included an objection to any public display of mourning. In fact, denying mourning rituals to the bereaved resulted in the phenomenon of slave funerals being held under cover of night (Wright and Hughes xxv). This particularly loaded image of funerals and burials being held in darkness foreshadows the present condition of gravesites, many of which have been destroyed, overgrown, abandoned, and built over, revealing a history of racism and displacement. Indeed, long after slavery, many cemeteries were still segregated, either refusing African Americans altogether, or relegating their plots to the “obscure corners” of the sites, next to “paupers and criminals” (Kruger-Kahloula, “On the Wrong” 133). These necrogeographic mappings underscore societal hierarchy, as the African American community’s marginalized status links the living to the dead. Gravesites, infused with this history, are assimilated into the narrative texture of contemporary letters, specifically in the African American pastoral tradition.

Cemeteries and other interment sites are complicated ancestral spaces of mourning and remembrance in the African American pastoral tradition.

Resituating the graveyard as physical and symbolic space, Ernest Gaines and Toni Morrison return to the South in their literary imaginations. In mapping their cultural memory, these writers necessarily have been “flooded,” as their fiction leads them to a past that is inscribed literally and figuratively in the landscape. In visiting the Southern graveyard of their pasts, Gaines and Morrison unearth forgotten lives and buried histories.

The death of Beau Bouton, the Cajun overseer in Gaines’s A Gathering of Old Men, is the catalyst for the elderly men’s cultural recovery. The private and painful stories of the men unfold as each claims responsibility for killing the overseer. Beau and his family had been leasing the Marshall Plantation which, one of the older men asserts, is “the very same land we had worked, our people had worked, our people’s people had worked since the time of slavery” (43). The circumstances of the narrative, then, support an African American pastoral reading,
for the complex figuration of land and ancestors provides a focus for Gaines’s novel.

Gaines establishes the primacy of the land in Gathering by maintaining the same locale throughout. This narrative gesture enables him to highlight the fact that the land is multifaceted, for it serves as actor and narrative influence in the novel. Although the reader does not witness firsthand the killing of Beau Bouton, his dead body remains unburied and visible throughout most of the text. Lying in the weeds, covered with blood, it is a loaded sign in the context of the African American pastoral. The placement of Beau’s dead body in the tall weeds can be read as a symbolic burial—one that resonates with the burial practices of African American slaves.6 Without ceremony or care, Beau is entombed on the very land on which he worked. The blood on the weeds is an apt symbol for the elders’ remembrances of their families’ histories.

Before the men gather at Mathu’s home to claim responsibility for shooting Beau, they meet in the cemetery. Although only one man, the younger Charlie Biggs, has actually committed the murder, each man shows his self-determination by claiming to have killed Beau, who inherently represents the systems of dehumanization, violence, and injustice. In this way, the men affirm their agency and the dignity of their heritage, and their ancestors. This event marks the beginning of their transformation, a necessary stop on their literal and symbolic journey to selfhood. Although the men live and work on the terrain of their families and culture, including the plantation and the Quarters, the cemetery is a literal ancestral space. Housing the remains of families, loved ones, and friends, the ancestral ground inscribes the earth as a visible textualization of African American history. The men recognize the importance of maintaining the graveyards as a visible marker of their ancestry, for the other cultural geographies have become silenced:

“The rows [of cane] looked so naked and gray and lonely—like an old house where the people have moved from. Where good friends have moved from, leaving the house empty and bare, with nothing but ghosts now to keep it company” (43). Because the younger people have moved out of the Quarters, the elders are the final living testament to the history and struggle of their people. With an understanding that these old houses and cane fields tell no story to those who are removed from their history, the maintenance of the gravesites is a necessary act in the preservation of ancestry. The usage of “ghosts” is particularly fitting in this passage as well. The ancestors are the forgotten ghosts who, despite the changing topography and population shifts, remain in and of the Southern land.

Establishing that the terrain is haunted with ghosts from the past is an effective strategy for the eventual release of the spirits. In tending to his family’s graves, each man performs a spontaneous act of communion with the dead, or what Sandra Shannon calls a “makeshift memorial service” (209). Once inside the graveyard, the men have a difficult time locating the exact placement of their families’ graves: “Each family had a little plot, and everybody knewed where that little plot was. If it was a big family, then they had to have a little bit more, sometimes from the plot of a smaller family. But who cared? They had all come from the same place, they had mixed together when they was alive, so what’s the difference if they mixed together now?” (Gaines 44). Again, Gaines reinforces the cemetery as ancestral geography that transcends the specificity of bloodlines. The intimacy that the community experiences is predicated on similar historical and cultural circumstances. Therefore, Gaines foregrounds the shared history of agrarian work and sharetcropping through the men’s necessary labor on the graveyard landscape. In order to tend to the graves, the men must jour-
ney through tangled brush, weeds, and grasses. Read in this way, the men’s agrarian work is, in effect, an homage to the ancestors. In fact, both Yank and Johnny Paul relate stories of the land that reach mythical and sacred proportions. The sacred is manifest first in the clearing of the graves and serves as an important foreshadowing to the men’s spiritual narratives. Gaines recognizes that the community is connected to the ancestors who are, because of their lives and their deaths, part of the cultural geography. He expands on this interconnectedness and recasts the land/community/ancestor as a spiritual entity. Making use of the African American pastoral, Gaines reconfigures the holy trinity as the communal body, the body of the ancestor, and the Southern land itself.

Although there is some initial Christian iconography present in the cemetery, most notably the sign of the cross, the men soon express their spirituality in pastoral terms. They eulogize those who have passed on, and perform what Audrey Vinson aptly characterizes as a Eucharistic ritual, enacted by Dirty Red, who “eat[s] and pass[es] out the pecans which had fallen from trees near the graves” (41). In fact, this scene is replete with pastoral sensibilities as the men are nourished from the land on which their forebears are interred. The pecans are a symbol of the buried ancestral corpse. Critics have noted the symbolism of this ritualistic moment in Gathering:

Gaines’s reader may enjoy his old men’s responses in the graveyard also, but because the image here is food, not simply trees, and Red is eating what grows from his brother’s grave, this image invites deeper symbolic interpretation. Humans literally grow out of their family, whose bodies nourish them. And although the individual dies, mankind is immortal, and our lives can be seen as part of a great, endless earthly cycle of birth and death and birth. Red’s communion with the past and with his brother is direct and satisfying. He invites the rest of the community to eat with him. (Rickels and Rickels 222)

Eating the symbolic body of the “Ancestor” (a singular entity, as the family members are blurred into one historic body) enables the men to recognize their unity in this moment of holy communion.

While a great many Christians celebrate the Eucharist, there is some variation as to how the gifts are understood. Some Christians believe in transubstantiation; that is, that “the substance of bread and wine are [literally] changed into the Lord’s body and blood, with only the species or accidents of the original substances remaining” (Guzie 65). The transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ necessitates the clergy’s blessing, for these elements are not naturally present in the food itself. The concept of transubstantiation is important to an understanding of Dirty Red’s Eucharistic ritual. The graveyard pecans become the host—a literal embodiment of the forebears. Considering the burial practices of enslaved African Americans, it follows that the land, rich with the ancestors’ blood, enables the growth of the pecans. Of note here is Dirty Red’s comment that “graveyard pecans always taste good” (Gaines 47), which implies that there is something distinct about the fruit of the cemetery, and that, while not transubstantiated as such, it is part of the body and blood of the ancestors. Furthermore, the ground is covered with the signs of the land/ancestors: “Pecans and acorns—you could feel them under your feet, you could hear them crack when you stepped on them” (45). That the acorns and pecans fall from the tree as a tangible symbolic places the men within the space of the pastoral and suggests a direct relationship with the trees, soil, roots, and forebears.

The men’s consumption of the pecans as a graveyard crop—and thus as Southern land—is evocative of dirt consumption:

...dirt-eating has a transatlantic as well as a regional basis. In a recent gallery show focused on memory, the
African American artist Marianetta Porter displayed embossed silver muzzles covered with filigree: objects so beautiful that I gasped at their source. These mouth-stopping talismans recreated the muzzles that white southern slave owners used to silence or starve disobedient slaves—and to prevent the eating of dirt. Since soil can provide nourishment and oral pleasure, why was it so dangerous? In Africa and the Americas, dirt-eating “bedeviled masters who used muzzles to discourage its ill effects. Done in moderation it was apparently an indulgence, like chewing gum or tobacco and had possibly developed as a means of allaying hunger in times of famine. Consumed in quantity clay was supposed to be a means of suicide.” (Yaeger ix-x)

Patricia Yaeger’s comments provide context for the consumption of land and its fruits, dirt and soil in the African American literary tradition. These acts, epitomized by the elders in Gathering, signal a kind of communion with the South, a landscape that may be at once nourishing, pleasurable, and suicidal (to paraphrase Yaeger) but above all else, a landscape that is home.

Other writers have also employed Southern dirt as a signifier of home. Alice Walker, in “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” concretizes her relationship with the Southern soil, claiming that “in the cities it cannot be so clear to one that he is a creature of the earth, feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by the rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does” (21). John Oliver Killens, in the introduction to Black Southern Voices, argues that the Southern land is central to African American culture:

... the bottom line for “Nationhood” and “Liberation” is land, earth, soil and dirt. Black dirt; our own black dirt to dig black hands into, black Southern dirt to create upon, the good clean sweet black loamy earth, to hold, to smell, to touch, to taste, to cultivate, to watch the good earth grow, harvest and prosper, to forge black and positive images. There certainly was and is no dirt available in the crowded Northern cities except in the filth-and vermin-infested tenements of the Northern ghettos, and the cold earth of the cemeteries (2).

Killens’s rhapsody of the South is resonant, as he distinguishes the dirt of the South from the filth of the North. The barren landscape of the North, he suggests, is even hostile to the interment of black bodies, which would be forever entombed in its “cold earth.” Part of what creates the South’s rich “black loamy earth” is, as Gathering suggests, the ancestral corpse. In fact, Ross Jamieson claims that “the sacredness of earth from a grave is also evident in Kongo practice, in which it is part of a ‘nkisi’ medicine bag, and is said to embody the spirit of the deceased which can come back to serve the owner of the charm.” Jamieson further explains that “in courts of law in Barbados, the practice of drinking grave dirt mixed with water was a form of oath taken by slave witnesses” (50). Recasting the entire Southern land as a burial ground, the practice of ingesting soil becomes a profoundly revered act. The Southern soil, rich with narratives and bodies, gives rise to Killens’s sensual descriptions: Holding, smelling, touching, and tasting the earth become interfused with the history that the earth encarnalizes. This level of intimacy with the material history of the South is imprinted on the soil, and thus the Southern land becomes the muse for African American writers’ remapping of the pastoral.

In keeping with the African American pastoral, Gaines’s elderly men’s nourishment is somewhat mitigated, for they are also ingesting the brutality that accompanied the Southern agrarian systems of slavery and sharecropping. The placement of the acorns and pecans under foot suggests that they are metonymic substitutions for the bodies of the ancestors. Not only has the community put its labor into the maintenance of the land—plowing the fields, tilling the soil, clearing the underbrush, picking the crops—but its constituents’ bodies are now returned to the earth, nourish-
ing the soil with their very being. For many Christians, transubstantiation is a most profound moment, for “what is given to [them] is the giver himself” (Schillebeeckx 138). This concrete consumption of the Lord’s body provides spiritual nourishment, which reminds believers to consider the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The elderly men’s intake of the pecans/ancestral body allows them to face the sacrifices made by family and community in order to ensure the men’s survival—a survival that depends, in part, on their ability to build community.

Neil Darragh reads the Eucharist as an expression of unity among Christians (97); in the same way, Gaines’s rendering of the Eucharistic celebration provides the catalyst for unity among the African American men. Despite their age and health, the men put aside their differences and unite to take responsibility for the murder, despite their lack of participation in the killing.

Because the food of the trees remains underfoot, the men are unable to escape the reality of the situation within the circumscribed area of the cemetery. However, in the correlation of the pecans with the ancestors, Gaines carries the theme of the Southern land as a larger, symbolic graveyard throughout the text. Gaines’s use of the pecans as a recurring motif (either in the consumption of pecans or the contiguity of the trees to the men) reveals that even outside the literal graveyards the old men are connected to their material history.

The men’s foray into the cemetery allows for a remembrance of painful histories. There they begin to share their stories, and in many cases the men confess to their participation in the systems of racism that devastated the lives of families and friends. Sandra Shannon asserts that “this tribute to their dead becomes apocalyptic in its foreshadowing of the group’s potential for retaliation. As they recall incidents of past cowardice, the reader understands the extent of the personal debts they owe their relatives for years of silence” (209). Their confessional continues throughout the novel as the men reconstruct the reality of their lives in the Quarters, thus providing an explanation for their sudden and unexpected acts of heroism.

Of further note is the fact that the novel is set primarily on Mathus’s porch. In The Power of the Porch, Trudier Harris discusses the porch as a site of African American community and oral culture in the South. Porches, she notes, “became some of the primary stages for interactive storytelling, for the passing on and receiving of oral traditions... Porch traditions created a similarity of experience in telling and hearing that became a part of the oral tradition, indeed almost a folk form in itself” (xii). Gaines, in choosing the porch as a place in which the men are able to speak, unencumbered, of their history, struggles, and hardships, recreates African American Southern culture in his work. When Sheriff Mapes comes to arrest Mathu, whom he and all the men actually believe killed Beau, he is transformed to a porch observer. He mediates his role as the white official deputy of the state (for example, slapping the men who refuse to cooperate) with his unexpected role as listener to the men’s oral performances. While seemingly intolerant, he, in fact, bears witness to the men’s transformation.

Continuing the spiritual transformation begun in the cemetery, the elderly men ask for forgiveness from the ancestors. Their discourse serves as a symbolic version of the Christian rituals of confession and atonement. However, the men do not seek heavenly redemption but ask the ancestors to grant them reconciliation, or what G. T. H. Liesting calls “remission of all punishment of [their] sins” (83). Tucker vivifies the act of atonement through the sharing of a compelling pastoral story about his brother Silas, the last of the sharecroppers, who tried desperately to maintain his agrarian identity in the face of mechanized farming.
Silas, alone with mules, challenges and triumphs over the Cajuns and their tractors, although his victory is met by the Cajuns’ scorn. They beat Silas viciously with cane stalks: As Tucker tells the crowd, "‘He was supposed to lose years ago, and because he didn’t lose like a nigger is supposed to lose, they beat him. And they beat him and they beat him’" (Gaines 97). The Cajuns’ method of punishment is particularly cruel, as they beat Silas with the very crop that sharecroppers had tended for so many years. Here, Gaines reinforces the Cajuns’ sense of ownership over African Americans and the land. The tragedy of the story is compounded for Tucker, who feels complicit with these forces of domination because he "‘didn’t do nothing but stand there and watch them beat [his] brother down to the ground’ " (97). Tucker must make a public confession, and more importantly ask for forgiveness from his brother. He turns his gaze from the men to the cemetery where Silas is buried to plead for forgiveness.12

The silence surrounding Tucker’s sharing of the tale is typically reserved for places of worship. In this context, the consecrated land pays reverence to Tucker’s story, as it too holds sway for the narrative: "Everything was quiet—the weeds, the fields, the swamps—everything quiet, quiet. Waiting for him to go on" (96). Gaines personifies nature as a living force in the lives of the agrarian workers. The sympathies of the land are with those who worked it, and as such the land, along with the listeners, pays tribute to Tucker’s brother. This complex configuration of beauty, violence, and death is further illustrated in the landscape of the swamps in Gathering.

Gaines locates this uninhabitable geography, along with the cane fields, as ancestral ground. After Charlie Biggs’s murder of Beau, he escapes into the swamps. Swamplands, with their humidity, moisture, and stagnation, are breeding grounds for insects and diseases, and thus are not typically cel-ebreted as ancestral ground. However, these lands provide a safe haven for Charlie. The swamps are archetypal landscapes of freedom, for it is there that many runaway slaves took shelter and sought protection. Despite the time period of this story, Charlie’s life as a sharecropper varied insignificantly from that of his enslaved forebears. And Charlie’s flight into the swamps affords him the freedom to act with dignity and take responsibility for his actions. Following his immersion in this uncharted territory, he, like his enslaved ancestors before him, is able to claim his emancipation.

The wildness of this landscape contrasts with the cultivated fields on which Charlie labored. Retreating to an untamed territory, untouched by the Cajuns’ technology, Charlie is able to decolonize his mind. The swamps’ virtual isolation from the plantation order (highlighted by their position outside of the plantation, bordering the cane fields) typifies the independent agrarian spirituality of the African American pastoral. Charlie’s immersion in the swamps correlates to his spiritual immersion into the sacredness of the ancestral Southern land. One of the elders, Rooster, claims that he “‘could smell the sweat, the field, the swamps in his clothes’ ” (183). Charlie’s baptism into the swamplands is palpable: The men recognize that “there was something in his face that you see in faces of people who have just found religion” (193). In this manner, Charlie becomes part of the African American pastoral trinity, and his corporeal holiness is marked after his death, as Dirty Red initiates a sacred ceremony: “I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on me. After I touched him, the rest of the men did the same. Then the women, even Candy. Then Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him, too” (209-210). Dirty Red is once again the officiant of this spiritual moment, which points to the connection between the graveyard and the

A GATHERING OF OLD MEN AND BELOVED AS ANCESTRAL REQUIEMS
swamplands. The configuration of land and ancestors in these ceremonious events mark them as sacred. Jean Toomer’s conviction that “time and space have no meaning in a canefield” (Cane 13) can be applied to these geographic sites as well. The land, transcending temporal constraints, becomes a locus of ancestral immersion. True to his African American pastoral sensibilities, Gaines stresses the fecundity and regenerative possibilities of the blood-soaked Southern soil.

Although Beloved is not a precursor text to Gathering, its sacred rituals precede Gaines’s. Conceptually, Morrison’s novel signals the genesis of the African American pastoral, setting the Middle Passage, in addition to the Southern plantation, as a primary referent. Thus, Beloved provides an important context for reading the elderly men’s spiritual transformation. Like Gathering, the crucial narrative moment in Beloved is death: Sethe performs a mercy killing of her daughter (the “crawling-already? baby”) to prevent her from reenslavement.13 Years later, the ghostly presence of her daughter (now known as Beloved) returns, and Sethe’s initial response implies that Beloved is, in fact, her deceased child. Morrison’s description of Sethe’s response to her first sight of Beloved is symbolic of a birth: “She never made it to the outhouse . . . more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. . . .” But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (Beloved 51). The fluids of this scene recall the birth of Sethe’s daughter as well as journeys of enslavement (crossing the Middle Passage) and freedom (escaping across the Ohio River). Notably, her amniotic fluid fuses these waters, as Morrison authorizes both body and place as repositories of cultural memories.

Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home culminates in her passage through the Ohio River. Philip Page reads this body of water as symbolizing the “cultural, temporal and psychological division that the novel explores” (158). In short, the Ohio River is a symbolic geography that represents the line between enslavement and freedom: “As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it” (Beloved 83). As if to underscore Denver’s river birth, Sethe crawls in an abandoned boat, and the whitegirl Amy Denver serves as midwife to her labor. Sethe is baptized in the Ohio River as her body is submerged in the flooded boat: “River water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe’s hips” (84).14 To the degree that Denver’s birth signals a new beginning for Sethe, a life of freedom on the “right” side of the river, the water is a sacred space of cleansing and renewal: Amy Denver “rins[es] her hands and face in the river.” Likewise, Sethe takes in the holy water: “She begged him [Stamp Paid] for water and he gave her some of the Ohio in a jar. Sethe drank it all and begged more” (90). Unlike the Ohio River, the Atlantic Ocean is not an obvious location of freedom, yet it also emerges as a sacred ancestral site, given its status as graveyard: “If the Atlantic were to dry up, it would reveal a scattered pathway of human bones, African bones marking the various routes of the Middle Passage” (Clarke).

While Sethe did not personally experience the trauma of the Middle Passage, Beloved suggests the illusory nature of distinguishing among the horrors of slavery, and thus Sethe’s enslavement below the Ohio River and Beloved’s afterlife, in which she experiences the transatlantic voyage, are enmeshed. Amy Denver symbolically underscores Sethe’s relationship to the broader community of enslaved people as she analogizes Sethe to a drowned man: “ ‘Well I was just fishing there and a nigger floated right by me. I don’t like drowned people, you? Your feet remind me of him. All swole like’ ” (34). Amy Denver’s words, though,
hold greater significance, for they reinforce water as an interment site. Likewise, Baby Suggs concludes that “there’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time.” (244).

Beloved, as an embodiment of African American history, symbolizes not only Sethe’s and her own tragic past, but the collective horror of slavery as well. She is both the enslaved African American and the African en chained on the slave ship in the Middle Passage. Although Beloved’s horrific experiences on the slave ship are not given a great deal of narrative space, the presence of that terrifying journey is woven throughout the texture of the narrative. Morrison evokes the Middle Passage through what AnnJanine Morey rightly labels the “sacred fluids” in Beloved (250). Morrison authenticates the sanctimony of amniotic fluids, blue water, spring water, milk, blood, hot rain, sea, oceans, rivers, and streams as these “sacred fluids” spill onto the pages of Beloved and conflate in Denver’s Eucharistic ritual.

With an understanding that Beloved embodies all the ancestors who were enslaved, it is fitting that Denver, Sethe’s youngest child, literally ingests the blood of her sister, and thus consumes the body of the ancestors. After Sethe’s murder of Beloved, she begins nursing Denver without releasing her dead child: “Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. ‘One at a time,’ she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby’s mouth. . . . So Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (152). This consumptive act is mentioned two other times in the narrative: Denver begins her monologue with “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (205) and later in the conflation of Sethe’s, Denver’s, and Beloved’s voices: “You went in the water. / I drank your blood. / I brought your milk” (216). These consecutive lines concerning water, blood, and milk indicate that Denver’s simultaneous intake of breast milk and ancestral blood is tainted with the waters of the Middle Passage.

Gurleen Grewal’s reading of Beloved as an evocation of “The Witness of the Spirit” in The First Letter of John helps to clarify my analysis of the Eucharistic ritual performed in the novel. Grewal quotes the scripture: “This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ, not by water only but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.” If this is so, then Morrison intentionally adds milk—a maternal, life-giving liquid—to the essential fluids of creation. Although Grewal adds that “the novel subverts the male trinity with the female one of mother, daughter, and sad ghost” (107), my reading of the trinity is based in the African American pastoral: The water is indicative of the passage to the West, and the bloodied milk represents, simultaneously, the mother-body and the motherland of the American South. Despite Baby Suggs’s horror at Sethe’s breastfeeding following the murder, the very fact that Beloved’s blood was consumed through the revered maternal act indicates the sacredness of this ritual.

Michelle Mock argues that Sethe’s nursing of Denver is illustrative of what Paul D labels Sethe’s “too thick” love: “Colostrum, thin, bluish love can sustain for a few days, but no longer. It is milk, thick love which feeds, nourishes, sustains and survives. Sethe knows this. She knows too the power inherent in the symbolic mixture of blood and milk” (124).

This breastfeeding event establishes the Holy Communion of the Eucharist, as echoed in Gathering. Consuming the blood of those who have gone before, Denver is symbolically fed their stories of slavery. Denver’s consumption of Beloved...
metonymically correlates with the transmission of oral histories. This metaphor of physical consumption, knowledge, and oral stories is clearly present in the men’s transformation in *Gathering*. By eating the pecans (representing the body of the forebears, and the land on which they toiled), the men ingest a history of resistance, strength, and pride, and find a voice with which to transmit their stories. Paradoxically, while Beloved (like the deceased ancestors in *Gathering*) is the catalyst for the communal sharing of stories, her body and the history she encarnalizes at the same time reflect the unspeakable. Her relationship to the other characters is beyond language: “They couldn’t remember or repeat a single thing she said” (274). In fact, the end of the novel points to her absent presence:

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper . . . . Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear as though nobody even walked there. By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water and what is down there. (275)

Beloved is not a conscious memory for Sethe, Denver, and the community, as her very being suggests a linguistic rupture. Beloved exists outside of language and can only be accessed through communal remembrance. The footprints that denote a trace of Beloved (which, incidentally, fit all of the community’s feet) suggest a shared relationship to African American history. The newly freed community holds the trace of their enslaved forebears, a condition manifest in Denver’s consumption of Beloved’s blood and the old men’s ingestion of graveyard pecans.

Unable to be captured within a sign-system, Beloved is felt in the signifiers that point to her presence: a rustle of a skirt, a moving picture, and footprints. As a synecdoche of the trace, Beloved exists in that gap between absence and presence. Again, the water motif has myriad implications for how we read the novel. Morrison’s employment of the Middle Passage as a trope of historical meaning at once establishes the instability of language and at the same time fixes reality through the ancestral body. Morrison returns to the Middle Passage as the watery site in which the signification process becomes fluid, where “signs float free of what they designate, meanings are fluid, and subject to constant ‘slippage’ and ‘spillage’” (Barry 64). Rafael Perez-Torres claims that the “‘slipperiness’ of language is foregrounded in the novel as words glide from one frame of reference to another, just as characters glide from one defining identity to another, and the form of the narrative from one genre to another” (97).

Morrison literalizes this “slipperiness” through the many references to fluids (morning water, tears, sweat, sea, storms, rain, and blue water) in Beloved’s brief narrative passage. The horrifying voyage of the Middle Passage is beyond language—rupturing discourse as it destroys the flesh.18 Beloved’s section undermines the semantic coherence of language. Her destabilizing discourse of remembrance is fragmented and non-linear. The signifiers “float free,” unclear of their specific referents, yet the entire passage locates the body as the ultimate signified—the very body that is, itself, disrupted and fragmented. In addition to the wounds of the flesh, the body is transient, and thus marking it as a kind of transcendent signified (as do Gaines and Morrison) reinscribes the shifting ground of the signification process. Although fixing meaning on an indeterminate text may seem to suggest a further absence, Beloved’s articulation that “there is no place where I stop” (210) indicates the omnipresence of the ancestral body. Mindful of the dialectic between absence (that which is not vis-
ible) and presence (that which is claimed through discourse), the ancestral body lasts insofar as a trace remains. Thus, by the end of the novel, the memory of Beloved and the waters of the terrifying journey are gone, yet their trace, inscribed in the community and in the Southern land, endures, just as the Mississippi River, despite its rerouting, leaves an indelible mark/trace.

While Gaines and Morrison peel away the constructed layers of the signification process, they do not dismiss meaning as that which is always deferred. Meaning, in fact, is not an impossibility for either novelist, as they locate its source through the “original place” that Morrison describes in “The Site of Memory,” a place, as conceptualized in the African American pastoral, which consists of the materiality of the communal body, the ancestral corpse, and the Southern land, flooded by the waters of the Middle Passage. The original place is not a rigidly definable space, yet its separate entities act upon one another to provide the genesis of meaning.

Repeatedly, Beloved is described as occupying a bridge before entering 124: “‘I was on the bridge,’ said Beloved. ‘You see me on the bridge?’” (75). Denver cannot see Beloved on the bridge because Beloved is, herself, the symbolic bridge, a “liminal zone between land and water” (Grewal 109), that links the Middle Passage to the Southern land, and the community to the ancestors. Fittingly, Sethe’s daughter is known only as Beloved, a member of the “sixty million and more” to whom Morrison dedicates the text. The communion between the living and the dead is reflected in the construction of Beloved as a funeral service. In bestowing the signifier “Beloved” (an endearment derived from the opening text of the child’s funeral) on the “crawling-already? baby,” Morrison pays tribute to what Alice Walker calls the “old dead” (“Burial” 34) and gives homage to the unnamed and unaccounted for—a community’s dearly beloved. The trajectory from communal defilement to healing is realized in Beloved and A Gathering of Old Men through “rememory,” which does not undo the material effects of violence and erasure, but creates a counter paradigm for the relationship of body and text, substituting the scarred body for the linguistic sign. Privileging the flesh as narrative authority shifts the terrain of historical discourse from disembodied texts to living narratives. Beloved represents the “disremembered and unaccounted for,” and is thus a metaphor for the improper burial practices of African Americans in the Atlantic Ocean and in the Southern land.

Finally, reading Beloved as an elegy in which Morrison poignantly pays tribute to the ancestors naturally results in a ceremonial burial.19 In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison reveals that writing Beloved was an attempt to provide hallowed ground for the ancestors: “The responsibility that I feel for the woman I’m calling Sethe, and for all of these people; these unburied, or at least uncere-moniously buried, people made literate in art. But the inner tension, the artistic inner tension those people create in me; the fear of not properly, artistically, burying them, is extraordinary” (209).

The burial of Beloved is formalized by the appearance of the “dawn-colored” headstone—a marked monument of the dead. Morrison underscores the presence of this burial with pictorial images of grave sepulchers which precede the three sections of Beloved, directing the reader to the cemetery as the material location of ancestral remains.20 In fact, burial and burial metaphors abound in the text. There is a symbolic tobacco tin buried in Paul D’s chest where a red heart used to be; Sethe considers her body a “crawling graveyard for a six-month baby’s last hours” (34); and a young Mr. Bodwin buried “precious things” in the land surrounding 124 Bluestone Road (259). More obviously, Paul D, while imprisoned in a chain gang in...
Alfred, Georgia, is forced to occupy a box under the ground, a ditch “five feet deep, five feet wide, into which wooden boxes had been fitted” (106). Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems analogize Paul D’s state to a living death: “His daily life was a tootentaz, a death (chain) dance that ended in his symbolic entombment in a wooden prison at the end of each day” (125). Paul D’s life in the “grave calling itself quarters” was shared by forty-five more men, all of whom were locked in these coffins during a rain storm:

In the boxes the men heard the water rise in the trench and looked out for cottonmouths. They squatted in muddy water, slept in it, peed in it. Paul D thought he was screaming; his mouth was open and there was this loud throat-splitting sound—but it may have been somebody else. Then he thought he was crying. Something was running down his cheeks. He lifted his hands to wipe away the tears and saw dark brown slime. Above him rivulets of mud slid through the boards of the roof. (Beloved 110)

This passage reads as a live burial. Symbolically entombed in the flooded Southern land, Paul D’s bodily condition restructures the ancestral graveyard as both terrestrial and oceanic as the rain “converts his wooden tomb into a watery grave” (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 125). His silent scream, muffled by the water, again returns the reader to the graveyard of the Atlantic Ocean and concretizes the Middle Passage’s place in the Southern land.

The trauma associated with enslavement, though, does not correlate to a fear of corporeal death.21 Indeed, as Ashraf Rushdy suggests, in Beloved there is “safety” in death (41). Sethe’s extreme action that she believes ensures her child’s welfare exemplifies this ideology. Furthermore, Beloved’s admission that, during the Middle Passage, there were those who were “able to die suggests that death was desired by many, and only achieved by some (Beloved 211). Paul D, who lived through unspeakable horror, sang “lovingly about graveyards” and was “astonished” by their beauty (108, 268). Even Morrison’s language describing the ocean-floor cemetery is one of comfort: Remarking on his relationship with Beloved, Paul D recalls that he “was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (264; emphasis mine). Sethe, likewise, expresses her peace of mind on her baby’s return: “I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy” (204). For Morrison, the graveyard is not a site of terror; living in a body that one cannot lay claim to is. Thus, cemeteries and other interment sites are complicated ancestral spaces of mourning and remembrance in the African American pastoral tradition.

By participating in acts of homage and commemoration, Gaines and Morrison resurrect and remember the spirit of those that came before. Karla Holloway’s insight into Beloved as a monument for the dead is equally applicable to the graveyard in Gathering: “If Beloved is not only Sethe’s dead daughter returned but also the return of all the faces, all the drowned but remembered faces of mothers and their children who have lost their being because of the force of that Euro-American slave-history, then she has become a cultural mooring place, a moment for reclaiming and for naming” (74). In this spirit, these texts are themselves offered as grave-stones—visible markers that attempt to provide a resting place for the ancestors.

Notes

1. A myriad of objects—shells, bottles, mirrors, lamps, and broken objects of many types, including pots, plates, cups, and saucers—are placed on or near the gravesite. Each of these items has its own meaning, but essentially is intended to comfort the deceased and guide the spirit to the afterworld. The antecedents for these gravesite decorations are found in West and Central Africa, and these practices are still observed in the deep South (Vlach 142-43).
2. According to Roberta Hughes Wright and Wilbur B. Hughes, III, "So mixed is the record of funeral procedures during slavery, it is impossible to extract the truth. It is known that some 'masters' permitted funeral rites while others objected to them strongly. Some objected to the use of African drums to announce funerals, some banned singing at slave wakes, and others outlawed Black preachers at slave funerals" (xxv).

3. For a more comprehensive analysis of the survival of African funerary rites in the South, see Jamieson.

4. Although some tombstones erected to honor the dead were constructed of concrete and stone, most markers were made of wood and naturally disintegrated over time. According to Ann and Dickran Tashjian, "Elaborate gravestones were a sign that these slaves were held in high regard by their masters, whose expenditures also displayed their own social prominence in the community" (179). In addition, some slave masters "honored" their slaves by allowing them to be interred with the slave-holding family. The racialized boundaries of the South are also brought to bear in these cemeteries, as the slaves were often buried at the feet of their masters. This hierarchical system of ownership and lifelong servitude was further revealed by many tombstone inscriptions, such as "faithful servant" or "beloved African servant" (Kruger-Kahloula, "Homage" 319).

Cemeteries that have withstood natural damages of weather and time are also in danger of being erased. In our recent history, the Sea Islands graveyards in particular have been threatened, as this property has become more and more commercially valuable. As a result, businesses, golf courses, and lavish homes literally have subsumed ancient graveyards. An attorney representing some of the families from Daufuskie Island cogently argues that graveyard desecration indicates the attempted destruction of African American history and heritage, which resonates with a New Plantation sensibility: "Destruction of graveyards is part of the genocidal effect of the so-called 'New Plantations' being developed in the low country area of South Carolina . . . . These areas depend on cheap black labor, theft of black land, and destruction of black communities and culture. It used to be indigo, rice, or cotton plantations; now it's golf, tennis, and equestrian plantations. It's all based on economics and racism" (qtd. in Wright and Hughes 51). This passage articulates the importance of necrogeography as another sign-system in the American Southern terrain. It relies Morrison's paradigm of place and narrative, as the Southern landscape, with its cane and cotton fields, necessarily passes on the stories of African American forced labor and enslavement.

5. As a Cajun, Beau can be viewed as an oppressor of African Americans, while also suffering discrimination at the hands of whites. His body, a conflated sign of both oppressor and oppressed, illustrates the interconnection of these marginalized groups in the South and, second, arcs toward the theme of revenge or reciprocal action. Gaines's original title for A Gathering of Old Men was The Revenge of Old Men, reflecting the notion of revenge is bound up with the cataclysmic event of Beau's death, an action predicated on the Cajun's former deeds against the African American community (Babb 113). For additional information on the Louisiana Cajun community and its relationship to the African American community, see Rowell.

6. This African American pastoral spirituality resonates with African ancestor worship. Laurenti Magesa claims that in these spiritual practices ancestors "are sometimes referred to as gods" (49), and he further argues that "the ancestors, though dead, are present and continue to influence life in their erstwhile communities on earth; indeed, they are expected to do so. The presence of the dead is assumed" (48).

7. In ntozake shange's Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, Indigo manifests this type of pastoral trinity: "Whenever her mother tried to pull the moss off her head, or clip the roses round her thighs, Indigo was laughing. 'Mama, if you pull 'em off, they'll just grow back. It's my blood. I've got earth blood, filled up with the Geechees long gone, and the sea' " (3).

8. Walker states that her intent is not to "romanticize the Southern black country life": "I can recall that I hated it, generally. The hard work in the fields, the shabby houses, the evil greedy men who worked my father to death and almost broke the courage of that strong woman, my mother. No, I am simply saying that Southern black writers, like most writers, have a heritage of love and hate, but that they also have enormous richness and beauty to draw from" ("Black Writer" 21).

9. Walker's and Killens's sentiment is echoed in Arthur Flowers' Another Good Loving Blues. The personal relationship with the Southern land is reflected in the protagonist's father, Lucas Bodeen, a man who "never did have as much respect for himself as he did for that land" (131). His intimacy with the land—he "bent down and took a handful of dirt, let it flow through his fingers and spread into the wind" (135)—is reminiscent of Walker's description, for in both instances there is an obvious affection, which is complicated by a realization of the brutal history the soil has witnessed. Despite his age and frailty, Bodeen still wakes up each morning to harvest cotton from the "dead land." The land—a
hilly, unformable plot—is responsible for the father's working to infirmity and eventually losing his life. Soon after his death, his wife abandons the land, refusing to be bound to it any longer.

10. Identifying the ancestors as holy figures is also evident in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson.* In this play, Berniece's healing is enacted through a ritual in which she calls on the ancestors for protection. However, in the initial version of the play, Berniece's incantation is directed to God: "Oh, Lord I want you to help me" was repeated fourteen times in succession. As Michael Morales indicates, "The change in song from a call to God to an appeal to the ancestors strengthens the African ritual properties of the play and simultaneously distances Berniece from a Christian context" (110).

11. Silas is reminiscent of King Barlo from Jean Toomer's short story "Esther." Barlo, described as the "best cotton picker in the county, in the state, in the whole world for that matter" (*Cane* 25), is the prototype for Silas, as both men have succeeded working the land in spite of the odds. King Barlo's placement in the first section of *Cane* is crucial, for he evokes an African American pastoral salvation. The sermon he delivers concretizes the mythical forces that are present, but remain largely unarticulated, as aspects of a land-based religion. He dismisses the notion of a heavenly father and, instead, looks to the earth for deliverance. Barlo's savior rises powerfully from the earth, not the heavens. In fact, the savior's enslavement by "white-ant biddies" (which in Barlo's text is akin to Jesus's suffering) resulted as his "head was caught up in the clouds" (*Cane* 23). For the informed African American pastoral reader, the presence of Silas in *Gathering* recalls King Barlo, and as such directs the reader to the power of an earth-centered spirituality.

12. Tucker's act is also reminiscent of the African ritual of "Beg Pardon" highlighted in Paule Marshall's *Praisepoem for the Widow.* Gay Wientz states that, in this ritual, "the living ask for atonement from the ancestors and beg forgiveness for those who no longer remember" (16).

13. In the African American expressive tradition, death as a preferred response to literal or symbolic enslavement is given voice in the lyrics of an early spiritual: "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free." Likewise, in *The Souls of Black Folk,* published nearly forty years after Emancipation, Du Bois considers the untimely death of his young son as an escape: "All that day and all that night there sat an awful gladness in my heart—nay, blame me not if I see the world thus darkly through the veil—and my soul whispers ever to me, saying 'Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bound, but free.' No bitter meanness now shall sicken his baby heart till it die a living death, no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood. Fool that I was to think or wish that this little soul should grow choked and deformed within the veil!" (353). Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place,* a contemporary text, also references acts of infanticide prompted by enslavement: "They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships" (103).

14. Philip Page argues that "all four major characters [Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and Paul D] undergo birth/rebirth journeys across water, journeys that thereby become symbols for birth" (144).

15. For a discussion of Beloved as a symbol of African American history, see Krumholz 401.

16. Morrison's reverence for this act is vivified in Sethe's reaction to her maternal violation by the "mossy teeth boys." Although Paul D evidences greater concern for Sethe's physical scars, the narrative makes clear Sethe's horror at the sucking of her milk, as she repeatedly insists: "And they took my milk."

17. Denver consumes the literal ancestral corpse, and the men intake the ancestral body indirectly through the symbolic substitution of the graveyard pecans. The different expressions of the Eucharistic ritual indicate the continuation of this sacred ancestral ceremony.

18. In *The Body in Pain,* Elaine Scarry theorizes about the relationship between pain and language, claiming that "intense pain is...language-destructive: as the content of one's language disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates" (35).

19. The kind of symbolic burial that concludes *Beloved* resonates with the communal ancestral burial in *Daughters of the Dust.* Set in the Sea Islands during the turn of the century, *Daughters of the Dust* traces the Peazant family's rural, agrarian lifestyle. One of the Peazant daughters, while working in the land, finds human remains staked into the ground. This monstrous image of human bones forcefully implanted in the soil encapsulates the African American pastoral. The Southern ancestral ground is rendered as both symbol and fact. The earth, most literally filled with the ancestor, reinforces the Southern landscape as a place of origin for the community, yet that resurrected ancestor forces a remembrance of the pain, or what Lucy calls the "evil" of the South (227). Amelia's unearthing of the bones is a necessary act—the wrongly buried must be remembered and properly laid to rest. Thus, like the townswomen in *Beloved,* the entire community participates in a funeral service and burial for the enslaved ancestors. In reclaiming the bodies of the ancestors, the townspeople lay claim to the lives of those who have gone before.
20. Morrison's text depicts two gravestone images typical of the time: winged skulls and cherubs/angels. These winged skulls, common to eighteenth-century headstones, are iconic representations of "death and resurrection, a metamorphosis from this world to the next" (Tashjian and Tashjian 172). In this way, Morrison stresses the connection between the material world and the afterlife, as Beloved straddles both existences.

21. In "Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death," Margaret Creel argues that "Gullahs attached a tremendous significance to death, but there was little evidence of apprehension at the prospect of dying. Slaves lived in the presence of death constantly and seemed to feel that the phenomenon was as much a part of living as their continuous labor. That they often reflected on the subject is evident in their spirituals. Yet their songs do not indicate that Gullah thought of death with fear, foreboding, or morbidity" (82). This sentiment is echoed by Genevieve Fabre in "The Slave Ship Dance," where she claims that, for the captive Africans, "death was less feared than enslavement" (38).


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*A GATHERING OF OLD MEN AND BELOVED AS ANCESTRAL REQUIEMS*