

4-2018

Murky Water, Fluid, and The Borderlands of Language: An Exploration of Toni Morrison's Beloved

Julia K. Hall

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp_theses



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Hall, Julia K., "Murky Water, Fluid, and The Borderlands of Language: An Exploration of Toni Morrison's Beloved" (2018). *Honors Theses*. 159.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/uhp_theses/159

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

**Murky Water, Fluid, and
The Borderlands of Language:
An Exploration of Toni Morrison's *Beloved***



Honors Thesis

Julia K. Hall

Department: English

Advisor: Rebecca Potter, Ph.D.

April 2018

Murky Water, Fluid, and The Borderlands of Language: An Exploration of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Honors Thesis

Julia K. Hall

Department: English

Advisor: Rebecca Potter, Ph.D.

April 2018

Abstract

Centered on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and her process of writing the novel, this thesis links the crossing of a river, the birthing of a child, and the creation of a text. By drawing upon theories of composition, motherhood, and genre theory, this exploration of *Beloved* balances discussion of writing process, genre, and textual analysis. Buttressed by a complimentary text, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, the connection between creation of identity and body through the gestation period and birthing of a text is reflected in Morrison's own process. The revolutionary splash *Beloved* made in the field of literary scholarship—and Morrison's success as a novelist and a scholar—demonstrates the significance and necessity of subverting expectations and crossing when undergoing or performing a birthing/writing process.

Dedication or Acknowledgements

Through the meandering process of birthing this text, my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Potter, has been vital to its existence. Her guidance, reading suggestions, and constructive criticism provided the support I needed to complete this project. I would also like to recognize the professors and my contemporaries in the classroom within the English Department at the University of Dayton. The atmosphere of exploration and curiosity in the classroom created a space for me to engage in these texts, theories, and ideas. I would also like to thank Dr. Rachel Bloom-Pojar for gifting the text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to me as well as for being a major figure in my academic growth. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my roommates, friends, and family for their unwavering support of me throughout this project.



Table of Contents

Abstract	Title Page
Body	1-28
Works Cited	29-31

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved*, rattled the literary world with its presentation of a runaway slave, Sethe, committing a bloody act of infanticide. In the novel, Sethe's position as both runaway slave and mother of slave children places her in a difficult, complex situation when Schoolteacher, the slave owner, crosses the Ohio River to repossess them as his "property." In this moment, Sethe chooses an act of motherhood that contradicts several expectations of "good" motherhood, preferring to kill her own child than to allow her to become a slave. However, the baby that Sethe kills haunts the house in the form of a spirit, and later returns to continue her haunting in the physical, bodily form of a woman in her late teens. The novel, nonlinearly constructed, flashes through time in a flexible manner, and, further, relates the story of Sethe's past horrors on and the realities of running away from the plantation. Stylistically, Morrison presents this narrative in a spun out spiral throughout the novel. Morrison returns to fragments of memory to build them into complex moments, key among them being Sethe's crossing of the Ohio river.

Although told in pieces, the pasted-together story of Sethe's birthing of Denver and the crossing of the Ohio River becomes a powerful moment and memory within the larger narrative of the story. Sethe's body, maimed and weary, undergoes a major test in the birthing of Denver. Sethe, on the Kentucky side of the river, sits with her swollen feet, a whip-inflicted tree on her back, and a baby on the way. Her water breaks, she enters a canoe that is filling with water, and she labors. In this state, Sethe is joined by Amy, a white girl and previously indentured servant. When Sethe goes into labor, Amy helps to pull Denver into the world and into the river-filled canoe (*Beloved* 99). It is there that Denver is born at the confluence of two rivers. Denver's birthing as well as the

rebirthing of *Beloved* constitutes two scenes within *Beloved* that complicate and challenge the expectations and socially constructed notions of what it means to perform motherhood. The theme of mothering within the plot translates into how the text's narrative was constructed and birthed by Morrison. The symbolic convergence of rivers mirrors the formulation of identity, language, and self that occurs through the process of crossing generic, ideological, and physical borders. Moreover, the multiple forms of borders and border crossings are situated within the framework of motherhood and birthing in Morrison's *Beloved*.

As Sethe birthed Denver, Morrison birthed *Beloved*. *Beloved* intersects four forms of birthing: the birthing of children, the birthing of texts, the birthing of hybrid genres, and the (re)birthing of self. Like the birthing of Denver on—or rather in—the Ohio River, Toni Morrison births the text, the novel. The waters of the womb, the children birthed, the crossing to freedom, the resurrection through the waters dance and shriek upon the pages of her work. The convergence of these moments stirs with her language of such rhythm and bumps and cadence that easily corresponds with the journey on and over the river. The novel, *Beloved*, is a space that enables the intersection of river, womb, identity, and language. The current and the ripple-along flow, with the logs and rocks, take the reader on a journey: *Sethe must cross. Denver must cross. Beloved must cross. We must cross.*

The prevalence of complicated border crossing in *Beloved*—of wombs and of writing processes—is supported and enhanced by the inclusion of several literary river crossings within the narrative. The physical elements of rivers deem them as pertinent to the discussion centered on the birthing of texts and children, particularly in this novel.

Rivers separate two banks. In cultural imagination, the river separates the living and the dead, the free from the enslaved, the containment of the womb and the release of birth. The borderlands of the river waters blur a border that cannot contain the binary, and swallow those ineffectual and shifting constraints, knocking down physical and metaphorical walls. Rivers rush along, atop, and through the earth. Further, rivers are dichotomous, geographical, and natural elements that function, with their liquid consistency, simultaneously as fixed and fluid entities. Rivers, despite their meandering edges, embody fixity via their physical location; rivers cut through the land. They designate boundaries. Rivers also demark a place of crossing. Rivers are borders. They not only provide natural geographical and political lines, but are also paradoxically in constant movement. Thus, the river and its borderlands embody the characteristic of simultaneous fixity and fluidity that other forms of borders, including those related to genre, also possess. Standing amid the river, emerging from the river, and drowning under the currents of the river are effective images when employed as literary devices.

The ebb. The flow. The meandering river constantly weaves in and out of the bank. In a way, it is a refusal of the straight and narrow. As a river dips into the banks, the writing process chisels and reconstructs a text. Each adjustment and movement influences the next. As Andrea Lunsford writes in *Naming*, “Even when writing is private or meant for the writer alone, it is shaped by the writer’s earlier interactions with writing and with other people and with all the writer has read and learned” (54). The writing process loops together between the individual and the larger, external rhetorical contexts. Authors cannot cast off their past conceptions of the world and writing when they sit down with pen and paper or word processor. They must let their child grow. When the

process begins, the child that has spent many months in the womb of the mind, and it will cross into the world of both freedom and restriction. Morrison writes about her process, “The pieces (and only the pieces) are what begin the creative process for me. And the process by which the recollections of these pieces coalesce into a part (and knowing the difference between a piece and a part) is creation” (*Art of Fiction* 386). While up to the knees in process, trudging along through sloppy, thick muddy process, writers must return to their previously attained knowledge, and that knowledge will affect their current work. They must wear their muddied shoes, leaving footprints on the tile floors. The writing process is one that is messy, but it is its messiness that culminates into new text. The new text brings the muddiness of memory and past experience into the current moment. In crossing genre, a text is birthed. Text is manifest. It is going through the birth canal, trailing all the bloody gloop, and arriving into a place of light and sound. But something also dies when the birth occurs. These actions occur simultaneously: birth and death. They necessitate from each other. Feeding each other. Borders are crossed. The confines come crashing down, rubble is residue, and out walks new life.

The period of time pre-writing/birthing and post-writing/birthing points towards the revolutionary transitions that occur during the crossings of these processes. Morrison discusses the ways in which she as an author came into contact with her narrative during the formation of the story, “That was the real art of the enterprise for me: bumping up against the melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth” (*Art of Fiction* 110). The language of physicality that Morrison uses to describe her process materializes the way in which language and texts can be tangible entities that “bump” into the author—and, further, how she bumps

back. The kicking of a child or an idea in the womb of the body and mind, respectively, links the pre-writing stages of a text and the gestating stages of a baby. The formation and growth of a text and a baby occurs internally, and develops over time. The text/body develops as an individual inside of its mother. During this time, the text/body is prepping to enter the world independent of its mother. The growth that occurred during the gestation period does not cease after the physicality of birthing/writing. The child/text must adapt to an existence of constant friction, exploring how to exist as an individual entity with an internal conception of identity amongst an external world. During the trauma of birth, the child or text is thrust into a world of chaos, into lights and sounds and voices and cultures and places and social expectations. The text must endure the obliquity of unformed self both in the womb and outside of the womb. Inside the womb, its body is not independent, but outside of the womb it, too, must navigate how it is to exist in relation to others and the world. The crossing from womb to world dramatically detaches the child from mother in a physical way, but even after birthing, the growth and development of the child continues as it enters into structural and societal contexts.

Beloved, like all texts, underwent a period of gestation and birthing. Morrison had to perform the process of growing the text and birthing it. Authors, including Morrison, must write within a context. The identity of the writer, then, is affected by the process, and, further, by the crossing of generic conventions. Therefore, the restrictive, nature of genre, combined with the ability to transgress those generic restrictions mirrors the concept of border as both fixed and fluid. The border, when crossed, creates. When crossing the genres of linguistic distinction, meaning can be made. Lorraine Liscio pointedly explains how these repeated crossings can be crucial in the creation of self,

“Meaning is produced by a continual oscillation between presence and absence: granting a thing an identity through language (presence) by cushioning it against what is not (absence)” (32). As Liscio notes, the crossing of genres is necessary for the birthing of a text’s identity. Genres, wombs, and rivers are three entities that Morrison crosses in her creation of *Beloved*.

The depiction of crossings of wombs and rivers in *Beloved* correlates with the exploration of Morrison’s writing process, and they both become apt metaphors for understanding and interpreting that process. Morrison’s scene of Sethe’s birthing of Denver is drenched in liquid imagery. A womb, when reimaged as a river, is a contained body of water that flows once broken open. A womb from this optic demonstrates the generative capacity of birthing amid fluidity. Tanfer Emin Tunc, also compares a womb to a body of water, “between them [mother and child] lies a vast sea, a watery space of amniotic fluid, symbolic of the deep chasm” (132). Tunc underscores that fluidity is contained in a “deep chasm.” The chasm represents this place of darkness, of reformation, and of ambiguity that is necessary to unform and reform a body. It is a place that contains neither the constraints of identification nor the expectations imposed upon a form. In the “deep chasm,” an identity can be free in the fluidity to form itself. The channel that Sethe must enter contains the fluid necessary for her to birth Denver and herself. So, as Tunc suggests, the amniotic fluid is contained in the channel, the womb, which correlates with the ways in which the waters of rivers are contained within their shores: they represent a dark place of reformation, a place preparing them for birth.

The crossings made between the residence inside of the mother and the entrance into a larger world, in the case of *Beloved*, demonstrate how crossings can indicate a

transition as well as an imposition of restrictions upon identity. The entrance of Denver into the world thrusts her into a realm of complicated contexts that have the inevitable potential to define and categorize her. Denver's birth particularly exemplifies the complexities of social and political implications of existing on the outside of the womb. The implications of being born to a mother, an African American slave in the process of running away from the chains of her life at Sweet Home, the plantation, are immense. During the crossing from a state of slavery into a state of freedom, Sethe cannot escape her labor pains. Denver's birth places a burden upon Sethe's shoulders after the crossings of herself and Denver are completed. Sethe enters an institutional freedom, but she also enters into the demands of motherhood. Subsequent to their birthings, when they (re)enter the world, they must adjust to their new identities and contexts, negotiating their previous states of being with their current states of being, unable to completely wash themselves of the past. The crossing of a fixed border complicates the identities of both Sethe and Denver, and it is only in the fluid waters of the river that Sethe and Denver are free of constraints.

The liquid component of both Sethe and Denver's crossings demonstrates how necessary it is to have fluidity as an ingredient of the birthing process, particularly because it allows them to loose the constraints of social and cultural structures. Denver and Sethe are born at the confluence of two rivers: Sethe's womb and the Ohio River. They are born in the borderlands between slavery and freedom, between womb and world. Denver and Sethe enter the borderlands of the river, enter the embryonic fluids, and are birthed/created through the crossing of the fixed border. In *Beloved*, Denver's birth did not occur on free soil, but instead occurred in a state of passage in the Ohio

River. Prior to the birth of Denver, staring at the Ohio River, Sethe faces a place of crossing, “It looked like home to her, and the baby (not dead in the least) must have thought so too. As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it. The break followed by the redundant announcement of labor, arched her back” (*Beloved* 98). Sethe enters a transformative fluidity, and there she is birthed as she also gives birth. Denver is birthed into the waters of ambiguity: neither born as free or slave. She is a child of fluid identity. She is a child of the river. She must form herself. Denver is from water and thrust into water, being birthed in the river of identification indefiniteness. It is in the water that Sethe and Denver are neither classified as freed nor enslaved: they are not at the disposal of cultural or societal expectations, norms, or labels. In the space of the novel and the river, fluidity allows for restrictions to be loosened and for identity to be momentarily inessential to Sethe and Denver’s lived experience.

The experience within the fluid borderlands in *Beloved* occurs amid the crossing of a fixed border. The crossing of the fixed harkens upon the multifaceted implications of motherhood. Sethe’s experiences of motherhood—particularly within birthing processes—are dramatic. In many ways, Sethe frees herself from her former life as a slave in the crossing of the Ohio River. In the description of Denver’s birth, Morrison writes, “So much water Amy said, hold on, Lu. You going to sink us if you keep that up. But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (*Beloved* 60). There was no stopping the water from flowing. There was no stopping the birthing of Denver and Sethe. The crossing, the birthing of both of the characters, Sethe and Denver, exemplifies the complexity of the crossing of borders. Spatial and identification crossings are intertwined in the scene of Denver’s birth. Within

these moments, Denver and Sethe's identities are dramatically and intrinsically altered. The dichotomous geographical transition mirrors the transition of their identities within the new, physical contexts.

The events that unfold on both sides of the Ohio River, on either side of the border, were places of bloody tragedy for Sethe. On both sides, Sethe cannot escape the chains of their enslavement. Before the crossing, Sethe begins her contractions, "I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River" (*Beloved* 37). The bloody side of the Ohio River is an ambiguous term in the novel because the Kentucky side of the Ohio River is the slave state, yet Ohio is the so-called free state where Sethe and her children are chased. Bloody acts occur on both sides: the violence of slavery and the violence of infanticide. Denver and Sethe, in the Ohio River, are in between the bloody states. They are in between the shores, in the fluid-fixed borderlands between these bloody states.

The Ohio side of the river is red with the blood of infanticide. Sethe's first daughter, Beloved, is the child that died by her hands. The act of infanticide occurred during in the novel when Schoolteacher, the slave owner, crossed the Ohio River to reclaim Sethe and her children as his "property." This child becomes a central figure in the novel, as the title indicates. It is her re-materialization that constitutes the second birthing depicted in the novel. The passage of this scene illuminates the unique birthing process that occurs, "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree" (*Beloved* 60). Beloved returns to 124 in the form of a woman in her later teens, emerging from the waters of rebirth. Up and out of the water; Up and out of the river that flowed in

front of 124; Up and out walked Beloved, reborn. Beloved's rebirth, traveling between states of being via river, becomes a tangible representation of the notions of motherhood, birthing, and border-crossing. In this particular circumstance, like the crossing of the Ohio River, it is a rebirthing for both Beloved and Sethe: child and mother. Both Sethe and Beloved have this connection to the river, but the imagery of Beloved emerging from the water, the river, particularly resonates as a complex, yet fascinating image of transference from an invisible, metaphysical realm to realities of a material, physical existence. This crossing not only constitutes a rebirth, but it also is physical haunting. Beloved returns from the dead. She returns to seek a vengeance against her mother, her bloody murderer. While debates about Sethe's reasoning for committing the act have been explored by scholars, including Terry Paul Caesar and Renee Lee Gardner, the act of infanticide becomes relevant to this discussion of motherhood when considering the (re)birthing of Beloved. Both the killing of Beloved and the rebirth of her are complicated acts of mothering.

The depiction of physical birthings of bodies in *Beloved* becomes weaved into several narratives of the text. The novel (re)births Denver, Sethe, and Beloved. The imagery surrounding birthings of the novel exemplifies the fixity-fluidity tension that is mirrored in the writing process and demonstrates how both can be physical birthings. Embryonic fluid holds a child, containing the entity in the womb and allowing for the being to grow. When the time of birthing occurs, the embryonic fluid bursts forth, and a child is released into the world. The waters of Sethe's womb flow twice in the novel, allowing her womb to be a liquid passage. Even in the case of Beloved's rebirthing, Sethe undergoes a physical water-breaking reaction, "She never made it to the outhouse. Right

in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born” (*Beloved* 61). The breaking waters of Sethe’s womb powerfully present the fixity-fluidity conundrum. The fluidity of birthing, the necessary liquid to the process, exemplifies the malleability of the creation of bodies. When considering a text through a lens of birthing and motherhood, it becomes particularly nuanced and complex. Additionally, it portrays how pushing and breaking borders is necessary to creation of any body, whether of being or text.

Common metaphors surrounding the creation of a text allude to birthing. One fleshes out a bone skeleton of a plot and characters by amending ideas with the meaty content. An idea begins in the darkness of the contemplative womb of the mind. Morrison, discussing her writing process, states, “Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in the mysterious process” (*Art of Fiction* 87). It is in periods of darkness in the womb of the mind that the text grows. When wombs are broken open, when the river runs free, beings are born. The reflexive relationship between free and enslaved, “good” and “bad” mothering, and inside or outside womb relates to the construction of language, and the limitations that occur due to the physical space in which texts are birthed. Within the fluid borderlands where bodies—both human beings and texts—are birthed, a crossing is made in fashion that complicates and blurs strict binaries. Within her text, *Beloved*, Morrison situates mothers in a context that imposes dichotomizing and impossible expectations of motherhood performance, but she also explores what it means to enter into fluid borderlands between these polarized notions of mothering.

The multiple depictions of motherhood, juxtaposed, in *Beloved*—the (re)birthing of Denver, Sethe and Beloved, and the killing of Beloved—exemplifies a border crossing that blurs the distinction between “good” mothering and “bad” mothering. The context of Sethe alters her ability to perform motherhood duties that meet the “motherhood mandate,” as Gardner calls it (204). The rhetorical situation in which Sethe exists recasts and muddles our understanding of motherhood. The expectations of motherhood and the inability of Sethe to fulfill those expectations cuts her both ways: as a runaway slave, she does not have the resources or access to the space in which she can provide for her children in the manner that the mandate requires. While, at the same time, she is horrendously denounced by her peers and society due to the bloody act of infanticide.

Sethe, her position as mother, and the act of infanticide she commits is entrenched in the intersectional ways in which colonization, slavery, commodification, and gender manifest themselves in a singular individual: herself. Additionally, Sethe exemplifies how mothers at these intersections navigate the challenges imposed by the “motherhood mandate.” The border between what is considered “good” and “bad” mothering is blurred in Sethe’s actions of motherhood. The complexities of her person situate Sethe in a position in which she is unable to fulfill the expectations of mothering. In response to the impossibility of her situation, Sethe reacts in a very subversive manner. Sethe completely obliterates previous expectations of mother and mothering by committing an act of infanticide. The socially constructed notions of binary, particularly in the case of mother, projects an encasement upon a gelatinous, fluid humanness in a similar manner to how a river separates two banks. When binaries are subverted and entrance into the liquid completed, then the space between “good” and “bad” mothering—just as the sides of a

river—becomes ambiguous. Sethe's reaction to the motherhood mandate is to violently kill a child that would have been violently abused and killed in the institution of slavery. This reaction and Sethe's complex person muddies the waters of motherhood.

Physically and/or metaphysically crossing a boundary constitutes a subversive act. Such acts, while often abrasive to norms, are also creative actions. The crossings between worlds, realms, and selves in *Beloved* correspond to acts of subversion that Morrison employs by crossing generic borders in her writing process. The concept of a river with both fluid borderlands and fixed borders correlates with ideological structures that authors push and prod against within the writing process. The messiness of language and genre crossings is prevalent within the text, *Beloved*. Through the tugging and stretching of expectations—ideological, generic, and cultural—the writing process carves the identity of author and text. As denoted in the discussion of Sethe's birthing of Denver, the crossing of river and womb demonstrates how birthing is linked to identity. A text, too, is birthed via a crossing from internal thought to external transcription. Birthed from the womb of the mind to the ink on the page. Birthed through a crossing of genres. Through these birthings, a text and an author are constructed and their identity formulated. In "Naming," Tony Scott discusses the tension involved in the formation of self-identity within the writing process because texts and authors exist within larger contexts, "As ideological activity, writing is deeply involved in struggles over power, the formation of identities, and the negotiation, perpetuation, and contestation of belief systems" (49). Furthermore, the personal, individualized formulation of identity through the writing process cannot exclude the influences of external, yet intrinsic, notions of rhetorical situations and contexts in and amongst which these individuals and processes

exist. The tension within this negotiation of power and words in the writing process is linked to the tension that occurs in the formulation of identity and characters within and outside *Beloved*. As the text is written, borders of genre and language are crossed and negotiated in order to create meaning because *Beloved* and Morrison do not and cannot exist in isolation.

An author, like Morrison, cannot create in a vacuum without the constraints of social, ideological, and generic expectations imposed by readers. In *Genre Theory*, Amy Devitt describes how the expectations of these forms of classification affect an author's rendering of a text, "Picking up a text, readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader" (12). As is indicated by Devitt, a reader plays a major role in the construction of a text. Texts are bodies of gelatinous substance. Texts are fluid bodies contained by wombs of classifications: language standardizations and generic structures. These forms of classification function as borders—borders that are like rivers in that they are places of crossing. Such expectations of what a text should or should not contain, how it should or should not be organized, and how it should or should not be presented influence the choices that an author makes while writing. It is through deviation, or rather the crossing, of generic expectations that an author births a text and rebirths a genre. Morrison functions as a subversive author, one that embraces the embryonic fluid, allows the waters of her mind to break open, encourages her text to cross genres. The effectiveness that Morrison achieves through embracing a fluid conception of genre demonstrates the generative capacity of crossing genres.

A genre, as described by Devitt, replicates the metaphor of a river that is employed by Morrison in *Beloved*. Devitt points towards the presence of both creativity and constraint tangled in generic expectations, “Instead of seeing a dichotomy between constraint and choice, then, my argument is dialectical that both constraint and choice are necessary and therefore positive components of genre—both-and instead of either-or” (139-140). A river and a genre, then, constitute boundaries that both constrain and create; they are both fixed and fluid. In the novel, *Beloved*, Sethe and Amy return to the riverside after the birth of Denver,

But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair—wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags that they wore. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them (*Beloved* 100).

In this moment after the birth of Denver, Sethe and Amy hold baby Denver in their hands, this body of new life, as they simultaneously wrap her in their tatters of clothing. This particular instance is representative of the context and constraints that are attached to Denver’s existence. The constraints attached to Denver and her positionality within the social and cultural structures of her context were formally established after her birth, her entrance into the world. The demarcation of a border constrains because it regulates what passes across it. However, the demarcation also functions as a way of ordering, or, rather, understanding what these generic and geographical borders indicate. The crossing of

genre, then, is dialectical, just as the river is fluid. Devitt describes how the crossing of genres inevitably necessitates a use of multiple genres, “If each text always participates in multiple genres, then even in that text a genre is moving, shifting, becoming destabilized for now and forever. Even temporary stability may be an illusion of genre theory rather than a reality of genre-in-action” (188). Rivers and genres present essential, necessary borders, which are generative once an entity enters into their fluidity, enters into a subversive crossing. Genre is constantly moving and shifting—and, therefore, correlates to the fluidity of a river. In *Beloved*, the presence of literary rivers and stretched, broken generic conventions enhance the novel’s effectiveness.

While crossing the fixed borders of genre can be effective, the subversive nature of such actions can invite criticism and negative consequences. Devitt explains how challenging the structures of power can be generative, but also how “to subvert those expectations of language standards is to invite consequences, both good and bad” (141). The process of crossing into the borderlands of river, of womb, and of language, is a subversive act, and often crossing can result in unsavory and often violent consequences. Devitt describes the dangers involved in crossing, “Depending on the society, the need to belong to a group—or the power of membership in a particular group—may be so strong that individuals choose to violate such etiquette only at a great risk to their well-being” (148). To subvert expectations, as Devitt denotes, is to act with the potentiality, the risk, of simultaneous creative and destructive means. Morrison writes in her recent publication, *The Origin of Others*, about an editorial decision that she followed, but now regrets, “But I was so very successful in forcing the reader to ignore color that it made my editor nervous. So, reluctantly, I layered in references that verified Frank Money, the

main character's, race. I believe it was a mistake that defied my purpose" (51). Morrison, in this instance, found that she made her white, male editor nervous by subverting the norms of racial indication, by the lack of racial indication, in her work. By making her editor, uncomfortable, the intention of this subversive act was removed for the fear that publishing the novel including the subversive strategy would invite too many negative consequences. However, Morrison, now, wishes that her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, had been more subversive. She believes that the creative potential of keeping the subversive strategy of excluding race indicators would have been worth the risk of off-putting her white readership.

The expectations of a text make it difficult to write multi-generically and subversively, yet these expectations also are necessary. As Walter Ong argues, authors must fictionalize their audiences because the immediacy of feedback is not available in written texts, and further, "the writer's audience is always fiction" (69). The fictionalization of an audience must be done because if the author and audience are removed by space and time, a text must be crafted with a reader in mind. When Morrison's editor envisioned the audience for *The Bluest Eye*, he envisioned an audience who would be threatened by the lack of racial indication. Therefore, he encouraged Morrison to adjust her work to fold into the readers' expectations instead of overtly subverting them. As Ong denotes, crossing the borders and subverting the generic expectations is no easy feat, "It is hard to bare your soul in any literary genre. It is hard to write outside a genre" (75). As Ong suggests, writing outside a genre is a difficult task because the expectations of the fictionalized audience must be subverted. The writer must painfully push the text through the womb; she must labor. In *Beloved*, Sethe's mothering

act also included labor pains, “It’s gonna hurt, now,” says Amy. ‘Anything dead coming back to life hurts’ (*Beloved* 42). Whether it is birthing a text or a child, mothering is a difficult task. It is difficult; it is painful; laboring subverts expectations in a way that demands discomfort. Birthing and crossing borders are painful processes.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a multigeneric novel. The mixture of genres creates a very intricate, layered story, which mirrors the complexity of a slave mother’s experience. The intersections of Sethe’s identity restrict her to a very specific, narrow space. In that small space, Sethe is constrained by many boundaries, particularly the bounds of slavery and the bounds of motherhood. She crosses both; she frees herself. She writes her own narrative, her own story by subverting the social and cultural expectations of the identities thrust upon her by killing her own child. The novel, *Beloved*, meshes together genres of bildungsroman, horror, and slave narrative. Denver undergoes a transformation, a realization of her own agency (*Beloved* 295-297). *Beloved* returns for vengeance by resurfacing as a physical being, bringing a zombie-esce component to the narrative. Additionally, the exploration of Sethe’s experience as a runaway slave correlates with a real story of Margaret Garner, the historic narrative that inspired the plot of *Beloved* (*Origin* 81). Morrison deconstructs the particulars of these generic conventions as she simultaneously crafts a new genre with new conventions with the text of *Beloved*. The content and the construction of this novel align in a manner that work to represent Sethe’s experience—and the experience of many enslaved women—with the robust fashion that they deserve. By combining these three very specific genres: bildungsroman, horror, and slave narrative, Morrison writes, crafts, and births *Beloved*. Morrison’s pushing of the generic exemplifies her subversive behavior as a writer, and,

further, how that behavior allows her to create texts—*Beloved* particularly—that have revolutionized the literary world and theoretical scholarship of the field.

Exemplifying the multigeneric, and, therefore, the genre-crossing tendency of *Beloved*, the section of the novel portraying the rebirthing of Beloved embodies some of the subversive practices of Morrison's writing process. The cadence during the portion written from perspective of Beloved reads as if in verse instead of narration or dialogue. The stream of consciousness is a beautiful rendering of a dark, complicated portion of the novel. This rhythmic cadence is not usually what is expected from a novel, "We played by the creek./ I was there in the water./ In the quiet time, we played./ The clouds were noising and in the way./ When I needed you, you came to be with me" (*Beloved* 255). The reader experiences what it is like to undergo a rebirthing from the perspective of a murdered, reincarnated child of a runaway slave. This passage exemplifies how Morrison pushes the expectations of readers and genres to enhance her narrative in an intentional manner—both in creating unusual characters as well as depicting them with equally unique forms. Madhu Dubey discusses the way in which Morrison herself noted that her piece of literature does not fit well within generic expectations, and, further, how she intentionally subverted them, "And this is also why she claims that *Beloved* is outside most of the 'formal constraints of the novel' and that the original sources of her fiction are drawn from African-American folk and oral traditions" (188). The form of the rebirthing of Beloved section neither does not align with the whitewashed and male 'classic' literary canon nor does it fit into the categories, the generic conventions of novel or the single genre of horror. Discussing how Morrison deconstructs the norms of generic conventions in order to weave together the narrative of *Beloved*, Carl Malmgren writes,

“*Beloved* is a novel that straddles generic forms” (97). Expanding on this statement, Malmgren argues that *Beloved* includes the genres of horror, historical fiction, ghost fiction, bildungsroman, and others (97). The consistent muddling of perspective contributes to the subversiveness of the piece. The content and the structure of *Beloved* straddles—and crosses—genres to birth a new form of narration. By including elements of multiple genres, melding them and crossing them amid amniotic fluid of mind and genre allows for the birthing/writing process to occur and for Morrison to birth *Beloved*.

Fixed borders, language, and rivers function as regulatory mechanisms. Devitt points towards the way in which standards and standardization constrain texts, “Both genres and language standards are connected to specific formal features, and participants come to expect certain features, and at times, to notice how those expectations are met” (144). Again, the connection between the regulation of birthing texts and bodies is rooted in the expectations of contexts. These expectations deem certain texts “good” or “bad” based upon what is considered standard, “normal” by those who are in power, those who have their voices heard, and those who create the borders. The regulation of the crossings of language is similar to the regulation of the crossings of river. The physicality associated blocking of the pen, the tongue, the brain is similar to the prevention of crossing a river.

The connection between river, womb, and genre is linked, tightly, to the physical and metaphysical, the fluid and fixed border. The work of Gloria Anzaldúa, her exploration of borders and borderlands in conjunction with language, and with the inclusion of her personal encounters with crossing borders, is essential to this discussion of *Beloved*. Anzaldúa, a Chicana queer feminist, whose theoretical work delves into the

ideas surrounding language, space, and voice in the context of the Texas-Mexico border, writes extensively on border theory. Her theoretical contribution to literary studies has been, like Morrison's scholarship, revolutionary. Her work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, exemplifies the complexity of language, gender, culture, identity, and borders. This work not only crosses genres and linguistic bounds, but also establishes a new theoretical framework in literary studies. In the third chapter of her book, she discusses the fluidity of language as well as the subversive nature of treating language as reclamation of identity, particularly when dichotomized languages do not suit her linguistic needs. When Anzaldúa opens her mouth and speaks, the waters of her tongue are amniotic fluids of words: they create something new with the passage of language from the border of her lips. Anzaldúa must be subversive to give birth to these words, and, further, the fluidity of genre and water allow for such creation to be accomplished. Texts are generated in the crossing of genre just as language is created in the crossing of lips.

The designation of borders makes crossings difficult. Borders—both physical and rhetorical—often function as regulatory mechanisms, deeming certain items, words, persons, and other entities worthy or unworthy of crossing. Further, the border, while regulatory, still emulates fluidity. These borders, and the enforcement of them by those who act as gatekeepers, become preventative measures for excluding certain “error-ridden” texts, which often correlate with language cues and generic conventions that categorized those that are “correct” and those that are “incorrect.” In this practice, power and privilege are allocated—who can enter privileged spaces and who cannot—and ‘proper’ language and writing is the passport, the key to these spaces. This idea relates to

the ways in which Sethe reformats our idea of “good” or “bad” mothering in that the dichotomization of texts, the labeling them as either-or, is a limiting and distilling practice. By defining genre as solely a binary creator, genre’s creative powers are diminished, and genre functions as a mere regulatory mechanism. When mothers of either texts or children are imposed upon by the expectations of culture or society, a border between the powerful and the vulnerable is often—if not always—in place to regulate them, to deem who and what is ‘good’ and what may pass. Gatekeepers place locks on the gates of language to restrict certain peoples from accessing privileged spaces. Sethe, because of her race, her gender, and her class, does not have access to these privileged spaces, and, therefore, she does not have the resources to mother her children in a fashion that would uphold cultural expectations imposed upon her.

In the case of Anzaldúa, standardized languages form barriers between what is “correct” and what is “incorrect.” These categorizations become particularly interesting in regards to Standard English, and, further, the frequent deviants from standardized language. As Anzaldúa suggests, those who allow for language to embrace fluidity and allow for multiple languages to flowingly intertwine with birth as a living, breathing being. They embrace the process of birth. Estrem describes the generative nature of writing processes, “Writing is often defined by what it *is*: a text, a product; less visible is what it can *do*: generate new thinking” (19). Therefore, those who employ language commit a knowledge-making act, and Anzaldúa provides an example of how writing and language can formulate an utterance that not only creates within the limitations of standardization and genre, but also how writing and language can be a generative, life-

giving act. The writer becomes the mother of her words, and the text becomes her offspring.

As Anzaldúa indicates, while language acts as a border, it also acts as a borderlands. In the fluidity of the borderlands of language, identity can be chosen, created, birthed by the self that utters the words. By restricting words and thoughts, gatekeepers regulate human beings. The regulation of words is also a physical chaining because words are physical. Writing and words are intricately tied to the identity of an author, so when a gatekeeper deems certain words “bad,” they are also ostracizing and othering the authors of those words. A testament to the connection between language and identity, Anzaldúa writes, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity—I am my language” (81). Identity and language are intricately tied, especially considering writing as creating. Being in control of language allows for writers to be in a position to actively participate in the creation of their identity via the construction of words. They ram forward, crashing through boundaries with guts, determination, and self-expression. Gatekeepers do everything they can to restrict certain forms of ‘bad’ language and people from entering into certain, privileged spaces. Those that function as gatekeepers use language and genre as tools to other human beings, to deem certain language—and, therefore, people—acceptable and able to pass or unacceptable and unable to pass. However, language is also used as a method of negotiating power, and reclaiming of self and identity.

The creative experience of birthing, and, particularly, of crossing borders becomes evident in the negotiation of language. In Ellen Cushman’s article, “Critical Literacy and Institutional Language,” she describes how gatekeepers regulate language,

but, perhaps more fascinating, she also discusses how community members negotiate language to attain the resources that they need. Cushman describes the fruits that those she interviewed attained by utilizing language borderlands,

Interestingly, the institutional language skills residents cultivated were based on their understandings of how institutional policies did and did not work. Residents believed these policies could be both enabling and constraining depending upon how they and gatekeepers negotiated these structures” (267).

When residents took up the gatekeepers’ language, it became easier to gain housing and other physical necessities. Further, it is particularly important to note that residents took up the linguistic tools necessary for the attainment of resources not because they wanted to uphold the ideologies knitted into the fabric of these institutions that provided resources, but because these resources allowed them to provide for their families. In *Beloved*, the gatekeepers regulating the passage of birth were the men from Sweet Home—School Teacher and others—who tracked down Sethe and her children. They crossed over the river to pursue Sethe, reminding her of her womb, that place of constraint. Sethe reacts to this gatekeeping action with a strong and violent protest in the killing of her own child and the maiming of the others. While this negotiation with the gatekeepers is drastic and bloody, the gatekeepers *do* leave her and her surviving children. Sethe, in a dark way, also negotiated with gatekeepers in a similar manner to the residents that negotiated using language on housing applications and other welfare programs to procure resources that they needed.

As Cushman alludes to in this article, language provides a gateway to certain physical necessities, but language also is situated in hierarchal power structures that can and are negotiated. The rules associated with certain institutionalized generic expectations and gatekeepers, who can manifest themselves in individuals, institutions, or cultures, enforce standardizations of texts. Gatekeepers make decisions that thrust the distinction of acceptable or unacceptable to another's language or text. Considering every word an action and every action a choice, the words of creation and of destruction are active choices made by those that write or utter them. Therefore, the restriction of words by standardizing languages and texts, denies certain persons access into certain spaces and ways of expressing. Therefore, due to gatekeeping, those interested in crossing such borders must attain a fluid notion of language to negotiate their rhetorical situations. The fixedness of borders and those that guard the chasm can be appeased if border crossers employ the malleability, flexibility of language to negotiate their passage fare: one can cross if they wade into the waters and paddle against the current.

Choosing to act subversively. Choosing to upheave the normative practices of a culture, a language, a nation will not necessarily result in safety, yet not asserting one's own identity can be a form of denying it. Anzaldúa will have none of that. She proclaims, "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of my existence. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (81). Anzaldúa, living in a culture that enforces heteronormativity, she declares her decision to loudly and clearly use her voice as a means of pushing boundaries despite any potential realities of serious risk and strong backlash. Sethe, too, pushes against the constraints of her positionality as

an enslaved mother. Her response places not only herself to be in a position of risk, but she also endangers the lives of her children when she crosses the Ohio River. Anzaldúa, Morrison, and Sethe agree: dramatic action is necessary to birth, and they will neither remain still nor silent. They will cross.

When the containment of genre is broken, something is born. Text, as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* indicates, is born. Further, texts are born out of the inadequacies of normative generic conventions to function for individuals or groups, particularly when standardized genres fail their users. In *Beloved*, Morrison combines genres and pushes conventions in order to tell the story of a slave mother, and the complexities that are included in the crossings and birthings that occur in the novel. Morrison pushes, subverts the norms of genre in order to create not only a novel, but also a novel whose complexity matches that of the plot, characters, and themes. The story-telling, generative capacity of Morrison's *Beloved* also instituted Morrison as a world-renowned author, a Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author. In many ways, through the process of writing this novel and the success that it attained the literary world, Morrison became a solidified member of the American literary canon. Morrison wrote her way into this position; she birthed herself as an intellectual, an author, and a writer. On theme of writing as self-generative, Anzaldúa writes, "When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act" (95). Morrison, like Anzaldúa, carves herself and space for herself through the creative act of writing.

Morrison's writing process not only functions as revolutionary to literary scholars, but it also enfleshes a text at the intersection of river and womb. In the forward

of *Beloved*, Morrison explains the evolution of some of the pieces of thought that eventually developed into her novel. Interestingly, she relies on her memory of sitting alongside the river after choosing to leave her day job as an editor to write full time. Further, it is fascinating because even in explaining her own experience in transition, she relies on the characters of the novel, the constructions of her own consciousness, to relate how *Beloved* began to develop in the womb of her mind. Morrison writes, “She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat” (*Beloved* XVIII). *Beloved*, her character, walked out of the Hudson River, broke the boundaries of the physical/metaphysical, and was born. Morrison has sat for many interviews throughout her time as a published writer, particularly after her award-winning status was stamped. In these interviews, Morrison has detailed key elements of her process, ranging from the type of paper she uses (blue-lined, yellow paper legal pads) to the ways in which she approaches discussion and representation of black culture and history. Morrison, as has previously been discussed, wrote—*Beloved* in particular—by crossing genre’s borders.

Morrison and Anzaldúa create texts that are not single-genre, single-language abiders by the expectations imposed on their skill. No, they are subversive authors and mothers. In an interview, Morrison states, “I can do the traditional things that authors always say they do, which is to make order out of chaos. Even if you are reproducing the disorder, you are sovereign at that point” (95). Anzaldúa, too, discusses her process as one of disruption, “It is a rebellious, willful girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twigs, clay. My child, but not for much longer” (88). The creation of a text is indeed a process that pushes

up against expectations. Both Anzaldúa and Morrison push generic and linguistic constraints in order to create texts that are revolutionary.

These writers, Morrison and Anzaldúa, push and cross genres, within their texts. The birthing process relates to their fluid self-conceptions of identity. To birth their texts, they must cross boundaries of generic means by transgressing generic expectations and norms. Anzaldúa crosses the genres of linguistic distinctions, and Morrison crosses literary and textual genres. The waters of birth function as this paradoxical space without the rigidity of structural and institutional labels of identity. Both Morrison and Anzaldúa birth their texts by being subversive, pushing and painfully subverting reader expectations—often those laced in patriarchal, white heteronormativity—to create something full and fleshy that adequately suits their needs to self-identify. Morrison writes in a culture that continues to uphold a literary cannon densely filled with the voices of white, heterosexual, upper class men. The choice to write narratives that explore the fluidity and construction of race, the complexity and humanness of motherhood as a slave, and the ways in which racism is learned and taught in both literary novels as well as academic scholarship pushes the expectations of modern American cultural practices and the world of literary criticism. The chaotic rhythm of her work, of her cadence, of her pen disrupts the generic conventions that are expected of a novel, a bildungsroman, a horror, and a gothic piece of literature. Through this disruption, she is not only named a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, but she also creates a text that becomes an icon of the canon, a revolutionary text that has been praised for the impact it has had on those who have read, adored—and beloved her children, her texts.

Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, Linda and Elizabeth Wardle. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Utah State University Press, 2015.
- Alaimo, Stacy and Susan Hekman, editors. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Blair, Sara. "Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary." *American Literary History*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1998, pp. 544-567.
- Caesar, Terry Paul. "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved.'" *Revista de Letras*, Vol. 34, 1994, 111-120. [jstor.org/stable/27666617](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27666617).
- Cushman, Ellen. "Critical Literacy and Institutional Language." *Research in the Teaching of English*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1999, pp. 245-274.
[jstor.org/stable/40171439](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171439).
- Devitt, Amy. *Writing Genres*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Dobrin, Sidney I. and Christian R. Weisser. "Breaking Ground in Ecomposition: Exploring Relationships between Discourse and Environment." *College English*, vol. 64, no. 5, 2002, pp. 556-588.
- Dubey, Madhu. "The Politics of Genre in Beloved." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 32, no. 2. 1999, pp. 187-206.
<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=5&sid=0014e783-5a75-4003-8580-a421982c8d64%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=00003160>.

- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no.1, 1987, pp. 49-82.
- Gardner, Renee Lee. "Subverting Patriarchy with Vulnerability: Dismantling the Motherhood Mandate in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2016, pp. 203-214.
- Liscio, Lorraine. "Beloved's Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 1, no. 11, 1992, pp. 31-46.
- Malmgren, Carl D. "Mixed Genres and the Logic of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1995, pp. 96-106. <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=0014e783-5a75-4003-8580-a421982c8d64%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%3d#AN=1995020299&db=mzh>.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International, 2004.
- The Origin of Others*. Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Ong, Walter. "The Writer's Audience Is Always Fiction." *Cross-Talk In Comp Theory*, edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola, National Council of Teachers of English, 2011, pp. 55-75.
- Randall, Roorda. "Nature/Writing: Literature, Ecology, and Composition." *JAC*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1997, pp. 401-414.
- Schappell, Elissa and Claudia Brodsky Lacour. Interview with Toni Morrison. "Toni

Morrison: The Art of Fiction CXXXIV.” *Paris Review*, vol. 35, no. 128, 1993, pp. 82-125.

web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.udayton.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=20&sid=43ed9586-5e46-4c13-a4c1-66490e3cf1f5%40sessionmgr4006.

Tunc, Tanfer Emin. “Rivers of the Body: Fluidity as a Reproductive Metaphor in American Feminist (Post)Confessional Ecopoetry.” *Women’s Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2013, pp. 113-139.

eds.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.udayton.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=f8b5ea0a-6238-4013-8e48-a4a97be68214%40sessionmgr101.