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## “You Ain’t Seen Nothin’ Yet”: *Beloved*, the American Chain Gang, and the Middle Passage Remix

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The classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied . . . to the assumption that history requires a linear cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1995)

There is a law of *progressive dehumanization* in accordance with which henceforth on the agenda of the bourgeoisie there is—there can be—nothing but violence, corruption, and barbarism.

—Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972)

Worse than the taunts and the threats of the jailers, worse than the tortures they inflicted upon me, worse than the horrible conditions under which I lived, was the way time dragged and dragged for me. Every minute became an eternity of suffering.

—Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live* (1937)

In November of 1994, as the number of prisoners in the United States was about to reach 1.6 million,<sup>1</sup> the North Carolina Department of Correction (DOC) issued a press release announcing that it had unearthed a relic of America’s carceral past at one of its facilities. The release read in part: the “Community Resource Council for the Alexander Correctional Center arranged for the National Guard to forklift the cage out of the mud and vines. The original three-inch concrete floor, a small toilet and braided metal bars are all that remain of the prison cage where 12 convicts slept.”<sup>2</sup> The news item goes on to point out that “the cage” is one of the two remaining examples in the state of the portable prisons within which, until the 1930s, chain gang captives were hauled from place to place as they were working to build the North Carolina highway system (fig. 1). It then relates how such cages were purchased for \$500 apiece from a Georgia company called “Manly Jail Works,” which in its advertisement for the “moving prisons” boasted that a “bucket of disinfectant once or twice a month and a bucket of paint once a year will keep

this cage clean, sanitary and vermin proof,” and that the cage was “officially endorsed by state and county prison boards all over the South.”

Early twentieth-century North Carolina chain gang and prison officials more than corroborated the company’s claims, stating that the cage allowed for fewer guards at the chain gang camps and that it actually became a source of captive comfort and good cheer: “As soon as we began to use cages our men at once improved in health and spirits. They have proved themselves to be cool in summer, warm and well ventilated in the winter, and the men are much more comfortable than when housed in tents or the stockade.”<sup>3</sup> After alluding to the horrifying statistic that the average life expectancy of those working on the state’s chain gang was no more than five years, the DOC press release concludes by relating how the state planned to enshrine one of the two uncovered chain gang cages in a transportation museum: “At least one of these cages should be restored as a stark reminder of how far we have come in penology in this century.” This essay considers how the unburial of the chain gang iron cage in 1994 was actually anticipated seven years earlier by its literary resurrection in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison’s most acclaimed novel.

As the largely ignored experience of Paul D and his forty-four fellow chain gang captives in the novel reveals, nothing about the chain gang experience was “clean,” “sanitary,” or “vermin proof.”

Even though the gangs came about as a Progressive Era reform of convict leasing, the transfer of southern states’ mostly black prison and jail populations from private to state control represented a continuance rather than an abatement of racial capitalist terror and abjection. As Alex Lichtenstein points out in *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, his seminal book on Jim Crow apartheid convict labor, the history of the American chain gang illuminates the degree to which northern liberalism and southern chauvinism, liberal bourgeois modernity and “backward” southern barbarity, have been mutually constitutive under U.S. empire. In so doing, Lichtenstein points to the central role of the federal government in supporting what was to have been a modernizing reform of the convict lease system: “With the help and encouragement of federal intervention [in the form of funding and logistical support], the progress embodied in a modern transportation network and the tradition of unfree black labor proved symbiotic.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to relate how, through the propagation of a

**Figure 1.**

Photograph of chain gang cage in Georgia, early 1930s. Original caption read: “The Cage: where convicts are herded like beasts of the jungle. The pan under it is the toilet receptacle. The stench from it hangs like a pall over the whole area” (John Spivak, *Georgia Nigger* [Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969]). Photograph courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.



mythos of black indolence—that is, the idea that freed blacks were only suited for “nigger work” and would only work by coercive means such as flogging, “stretching,” and a modern version of the feudal stocks—the South was able to progress toward economic modernization through prison slavery with county chain gangs playing a central role in projects such as railroad and highway construction, coal and iron ore mining, and forest industries. As one former prisoner of a Florida chain gang recounts, captives experienced a banality of terror that blurred the line between life and death and offered a dubious replay of coerced performance spectacles that took place on the slave ship, the coffle, and plantation: “we were sent to the swamps to do logging and lay rails. After 24 hours there *we prayed for death*. . . . If we did not work fast enough we were whipped cruelly. [And] after beating us all week [the guard captain] and *his guards would come and make us sing and dance for them*.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Beloved*, Morrison’s depiction of the slave ship, the plantation, and the chain gang disallows a reading of formations of racial terror and genocide as aberrant or premodern exceptions to the rule of U.S. capitalism, Western penology, and modernity. The resurfacing of the chain gang cage in her novel, along with its resurrection of a ghostly survivor of the Middle Passage, exemplifies the centrality of architectures such as the slave ship hold, the antebellum slave plantation, and chain gang cage with respect to U.S. empire. Her work expresses what I describe as the “Middle Passage carceral model”—a paradigm of racial capitalist internment and violence that necessitates a shifting of white-subject-centered penal historiography. This remapping of the carceral through the lens of epochal race terror reads the barracoons, coffles, slave holds, and plantations of the Middle Passage as central to the imperialist project—as spatial, ideological, ontological, and economic analogues of modern punishment that haunted their way into the present by way of formations of spatial violence such as the chain gang cage.<sup>6</sup>

What I describe as the “forward-haunting” aspects of Morrison’s ostensibly past-obsessed text also suggest that gothic penal architectures such as the chain gang cage are not ready to be memorialized in transportation museums as emblems of a bygone era of white supremacy and nascent southern capitalism—that is, if such memorialization within the context of white supremacist culture can amount to anything more than a disqualification of the survivals of unfreedom. *Beloved* underscores that the terror modalities of chattel slavery have not only survived the putatively static borderline of 1865, but have in fact reached their apogee with the “Security Housing Units” and “Super-maximum” security prisons of today’s prison industrial complex.<sup>7</sup> Through this new approach to Morrison’s most critically scrutinized text, I argue that

formations of chattel slavery have resurfaced in updated forms in the context of a system of mass civil, premature/living death, and human *incapacitation* (to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's term), which, as of this writing, entombs more than 2.3 million human beings and, more specifically, a modern penitentiary system that now engages one out of every nine black men in the United States between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine.<sup>8</sup>

### The Narrative of Neoslavery

Literary critical discussions of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* often describe the text as a "neoslave narrative." This designation signifies an African American narrative mode of retrospection, whereby modern black writers such as Margaret Walker, Gayl Jones, and Ernest Gaines have offered re-visions of the violence and subjection of the transatlantic slave trade through the lens of the "post" slavery moment. In what follows, I problematize this prevailing conception of temporality and historicity with respect to Morrison's most acclaimed novel, and to U.S. history in general. I do so by reading the text, not as a neoslave narrative, but rather as a "narrative of neoslavery." The internment experiences of those such as Beloved, Sethe, Paul D (and Sethe's mother, who is lynched aboard a slave ship) underscore how for the African and those of African descent, the modern prison did not begin with Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, the Walnut Street Jail, or the Auburn System, but with the coffles, barracoons, slave ships, and slave "pens" of the Middle Passage. As Dylan Rodriguez argues in this regard:

A genealogy of the contemporary prison regime awakens both the historical memory and the sociopolitical logic of the Middle Passage. The prison has come to form a hauntingly similar spatial and temporal continuum between social and biological notions of life and death, banal liberal civic freedom and totalizing unfreedom, community and alienation, agency and liquidation, the "human" and the subhuman/nonhuman. In a reconstruction of the Middle Passage's constitutive logic, the reinvented prison regime is articulating and self-valORIZING a commitment to efficient and effective bodily immobilization within the mass-based ontological subjection of human beings.<sup>9</sup>

In *Beloved*, the transactional relationship between carceral spaces situated on opposing sides of the 1865 border, underlines a mode of radical counterhistorical theorization within Morrison's text. That is, the central role of prison spaces vis-à-vis the novel's overall severing of linear temporality underlines its role as narrative reorientation of occidental penology by way of a nondiachronic, black diasporic timeline—or more properly speaking, a temporal circularity,

about which ostensibly obsolete or premodern terror modalities resurface right along with the text's putatively dead ghost-child.

As Robert Broad has pointed out, *Beloved* represents the return not only of Sethe's "crawling already" baby, but also of all those who were murdered as a direct result of their entombment in the holds, half- and quarterdecks of slave ships during the Middle Passage—the "60 million and more" referred to in the novel's epigraph.<sup>10</sup> *Beloved* makes reference to her horrifying transatlantic experience in a stream-of-consciousness interlude that occurs well into the text:

*All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine . . . some who eat nasty themselves . . . at night I cannot see the dead man on my face . . . small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in if we had more to drink we could make tears . . . we are all trying to leave our bodies behind . . . in the beginning we could vomit now we do not now we cannot . . . someone is trembling . . . he is fighting hard to leave his body which is a small bird trembling there is no room to tremble so he is not able to die . . . those able to die are in a pile.<sup>11</sup>*

Compare *Beloved*'s testimony to that given in 1788 by the Reverend John Newton after he had witnessed conditions aboard European slave vessels. He describes the spaces in which the captives were packed

sometimes more than five feet high and sometimes less; and this height is divided toward the middle for the slaves lie in two rows [on platforms] one above the other, on each side of the ship, close to each other like books on a shelf. I have known them so close that the shelf would not easily contain one more.

The poor creatures, thus cramped, are likewise in irons for the most part which makes it difficult for them to turn or move or attempt to rise or to lie down without hurting themselves or each other. Every morning . . . *more instances than one are found of the living and the dead fastened together.*<sup>12</sup>

Both testimonies describe a Western philosophy of imprisonment that was used from the early modern period through the nineteenth century aboard slave vessels, a system known as "tight-packing." The teleology of this mass internment system had to do with maximizing the profitability of the trade in human commodities by requiring that slaves be crammed into every inch of available space. The bodies of slave ship prisoners were horizontally pressed together and vertically stacked upon each other in a manner that immobilized captive men, women, and children to such an extent that shifting one's position or sitting up straight was often impossible. Those entombed in the slave

hold were often forced to lie in their own excrement for the entire transatlantic journey. Such methods of bioarchitectural calculation are evidenced in the now infamous sketch of the Liverpool slaver *Brookes*. The diagram pictures 451 black figures placed “spoon” style into the holds and tiered platforms of the ship, a number that was three short of what in 1788 was deemed legal for a ship of its size. This sardine-like tiering of human cargo theoretically allotted a space of six feet long by sixteen inches wide (and approximately two feet high) for every man; five feet, ten inches long by sixteen inches wide for every woman; five feet by fourteen inches for every boy; and four feet by six inches for every girl. That the *Brookes* carried as many as 609 prisoners (155 more than its capacity) across the Atlantic before the 1788 law was passed exemplifies the dehumanizing spatial techniques by which early modernity’s first racialized prisons produced mass biological death of genocidal proportions.<sup>13</sup> Between 15 and 20 percent of those who began the “passage” in the coffles and barracoons of Africa perished before reaching the Americas—a figure that amounted to at least 12 million premature deaths.<sup>14</sup>

For my purposes, however, it is important that we recognize how the incidence of biological death that occurred in the coffles, barracoons, “factories,” ships, and “pens,” of the Middle Passage does not offer a complete measure of the genocidal abjection of (early) modern imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> That both *Beloved* and Dr. Newton speak of the living and the dead being piled on top of one another and fastened together by chains in the holds of slave ships graphically testifies to how the killing of the African slave involved more than the taking of her biological life. Stated simply, Black Atlantic and “New World” mass internment, enslavement, and genocide were and *are* produced as much through the mass reproduction of *living death* as through the production of biologically expired bodies. Here we might think of the radical import of Sethe’s only monologue in which she explains the untold reason behind her ostensibly insane act of infanticide: “*If I hadn’t killed her she would have died* and that is something I could not bear.”<sup>16</sup> If we take into account living death as a fundamental aspect of Middle Passage and plantation imprisonment, then the number of those killed in the trade does indeed approach the seemingly miscalculated death count of “60 million and more” that appears in *Beloved*’s epigraph. And, as we shall see below, 60 million and more becomes an even more accurate count if we consider how slavery’s (living) death toll reaches across the border of Emancipation. The inclusion of the category of living death within the techniques of state and corporate killing also allows us to attend to the ways in which today’s modern version of mass human warehousing—that is, the penitentiary—represents an exten-

sion of rather than an antithesis to Middle Passage genocide. As Colin (aka Joan) Dayan states with respect to the connected positionalities of slave and criminal: “Death takes many forms, including loss of status beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant.”<sup>17</sup>

The status loss that accompanied the mass entombment and natal alienation of transatlantic imprisonment was enacted on the ideological and ontological level through the questioning of the slave’s membership in the community of humans.<sup>18</sup> In other words, if the captive could be projected as inhuman or subhuman then *dehumanization* could be emptied of any semantic value, thereby disqualifying black injury.<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Wynter uses the term *biological idealism* to describe the ideological system that transmuted African humanity into quasi-bestiality and black personhood into objecthood. For her, the “nigger” was made to represent “the ultimate zero degree category of an ostensibly ‘primal’ human nature whose differentiation from a lurking bestiality was dangerously imprecise and uncertain, so uncertain as to call for a question mark to be placed with respect to the humanity of this zero-degree category.”<sup>20</sup> The repeated references to the dispossession of manhood and womanhood on the part of Sethe, Paul D, and the rest of the “Sweet Home men”—“you got two legs not four”; “I had a bit in my mouth”—represent the reintroduction within the “post” slavery moment of the ideological construct of black subhumanity—discursive branding processes that began with chattel slavery, and that were specifically inaugurated with the mass physical branding, rape, and clogging of human beings aboard the slave ship. Consequently, the realm of ideology—the casting of blackness as an anthropology of metaphysical deficit<sup>21</sup>—was as much of a weapon in the production of mass social and living death as whips, chains, and pistols.<sup>22</sup>

In one installment of a series of epistolary narratives from 1795 to 1796, George Pinkard, a British medical doctor, limns the imbrications of architectural and ideological violence through his attempt at eliding the terror of the Middle Passage. After insinuating that a group of African women aboard a slave ship flirted with himself and other white male ship tourists by giving them “an expressive look . . . or significant gesture,” Pinkard attempts a rationalization of slave ship terror that prefigures the plantation romances of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literary and popular culture:

Their sleeping berths were the naked boards. Divided into two crowded parties they reposed, during the night, upon the bare planks below—the males on the main deck—the females upon the deck of the aft cabin. In the day time they . . . were kept mostly upon the open deck, where they were made to exercise, and encouraged by the music of their beloved banjor [*sic*], to *dancing and cheerfulness*. We saw them dance and heard them sing. In

dancing they scarcely moved their feet, but threw about their arms and twisted and writhed their bodies into a multitude of disgusting and indecent attitudes. Their song was a wild and savage yell, devoid of all softness and harmony, and loudly chanted in monotony.

Their food is chiefly rice which they prepare by plain and simple boiling. At the time of messing they squat around the bowl in large bodies, upon their heels and haunches, *like monkeys [sic]*, each putting his paw into the platter to claw out with his fingers. We saw several of them employed in beating the red husks off the rice, which was done by pounding the grain in wooden mortars. . . . This appeared to be a labor of cheerfulness. *They beat the pestle in time to the song and seemed happy, yet nothing of industry marked their toil*; for the pounding was performed by indolently raising the pestle and then leaving it fall by its own weight.<sup>23</sup>

Here the physical branding that slaves received upon their kidnapping onto the coffle and slave ship is coupled with their epistemic branding as animalistic, infantile, and lazy; as such, the forebears of the plantation “darky” are incapable of feeling the pain of internment, of recognizing the enormity of their dispossession, or of performing industrious labor without the spur of punishment. For those humans branded as savage “monkeys,” terror and collective disappearance are an occasion for joviality, merriment, and song. As in the aforementioned testimony of a twentieth-century chain gang captive, what is absent from this account is that such “happiness” on the part of the slave ship prisoner was only made possible through the enactment or threat of physical terror. On the other hand, as Saidiya Hartman suggests, what was at issue for the slavery apologist when acting as spectator of black suffering was not veracity with respect to the experience of the enslaved but the transmutation of black sufferance into a stage of childlike enjoyment: “The terms of this disavowal are something like: No the slave is not in pain. Pain isn’t really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly the slave is happy and . . . his happiness exceeds our own . . . the initial revulsion and horror induced by the sight of shackled and manacled bodies gives way to reassurances about black pleasure.”<sup>24</sup>

Whether through its stagings of black inurnment to pain or through the direct enactment of collective terror, the slave ship symbolized the manner in which natal alienation, the slave’s total banishment from lines of kinship and modes of sociocultural life, catalyzed mass living death, the zero degree of enslavement’s serialized social death. In so doing, it functioned as an unprecedented penological configuration of early modernity, one that turned the Atlantic into a *necropolitical* geography (to use Achille Mbembe’s term), an oceanic death/prison-scape, wherein the border separating life and death became virtually indecipherable.<sup>25</sup>

Beloved's presence in Morrison's novel takes on a new meaning if we attend to how her (un)dead or dead-living state represents the obverse of the living death condition of Middle Passage prisoners. Her lived remembrance of transatlantic imprisonment gives us a prime example of how inanimate spaces can acquire devastating agency through radical asymmetries of power. In the case of the slave ship, a transfer of subjectivity took place wherein an inanimate architecture acquired "a life of its own" by siphoning the life of the captive. In Beloved's monologue, we see how the cramped conditions of the slave ship played a determining role in social relations even as they were a product of those relations. In terms of its violent and dehumanizing effects on the captive body, the slave/prison ship carried what Louis Althusser would describe as a "relative autonomy" vis-à-vis the reproduction of relations of dominance.<sup>26</sup> This powerful agency of place is represented elsewhere in *Beloved* by Denver's reaction whenever she approached 124, a house that she regarded "as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits."<sup>27</sup> In her narrative re-creation of the slave ship hold, Morrison exposes a space whose subjectivity and purpose were defined by its power to immobilize, torture, and kill.

Literary critiques of the relationship between personal memory and collective history in *Beloved* have often described characters' reliving of the experience of slavery in strictly symbolic terms. According to this approach, the presence of the Middle Passage in the text represents the need of those such as Sethe and Paul D to revisit repressed horrors of the past in order to begin the process of self-possession and to initiate the healing process. In Sethe's case, Beloved's presence initiates her recollection of a conversation she had with Nan regarding the repeated rape of Sethe's mother aboard a slave ship. Thus, in such a psychoanalytical approach, the first line of Beloved's monologue—"All of it is now . . . it is always now . . . there will never be a time when . . . I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too"—would represent how the memory of the atrocities of the Middle Passage and, by extension, of "Sweet Home" plantation is still alive within the psyche of the newly freed black subject. Although the validity of this argument is largely inarguable, I want to suggest how it might also be incomplete. A closer look at the relationship between Beloved's monologue and the novel's chain gang scene requires us to reexamine Morrison's rendering of the slave ship and plantation as sites of African diasporic living memory, or what Sethe describes as her "rememory." The transactional relationship of Black Atlantic, plantation, and Jim Crow prison architectures across boundaries of space and time registers the salience of Stephanie Smallwood's theoretical assertion of the temporal boundlessness

of the Middle Passage—that, while trapped within the prison ship hold, it was “enormously difficult for Africans to clearly distinguish the phases of their journey, or to anticipate the end of one phase and the beginning of another.” The experience of Paul D and forty-five other black men in a chain gang camp in Alfred, Georgia, registers the possibility that what Smallwood describes as the “temporal and spatial entrapment” of the Middle Passage never ended—that indeed, *it is always now*—even, or especially, after the Civil War.<sup>28</sup>

In a section of the novel that has received little critical attention (and that is also conspicuously absent from Jonathan Demme’s cinematic adaptation of the text), Paul D recounts his experience of being sold by Schoolteacher—a punishment that resulted from his attempted escape from Sweet Home. While being led in a coffle across the state border from Kentucky to Virginia with ten other slaves, Paul D attempts to kill Brandywine, his new owner. His efforts fail; and, as a result of the “crime” of attempting to attain freedom, he is sent to a pre-Civil War chain gang camp in Georgia. Morrison opens the chain gang chapter with a description of the method that was used to warehouse Paul D and his forty-five fellow prison slaves:

The ditches, the one thousand feet of earth—five feet deep, five feet wide, into which wooden boxes had been fitted. A door of bars that you could fit on hinges like a cage opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt. Two feet of it over his head; three feet of open trench in front of him with anything that crawled or scurried welcome to share *that grave calling itself quarters*.<sup>29</sup>

For Paul D, the trauma of living burial within the prison camp “box” manifests itself physically in the form of uncontrollable body movements. The narrator describes the point at which “they shoved [D] into the box and dropped the cage door down, his hands quit taking instruction. On their own they traveled. Nothing could stop them or get their attention. They would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lima beans. . . . The miracle of their obedience came with the hammer at dawn.”<sup>30</sup> Tellingly, the word Morrison uses in this chapter and other sections of the text to describe the uncontrollable physical signs of Paul D’s trauma inducing experience of underground living burial is *trembling*, the very same word that Beloved uses repeatedly to describe the condition of a fellow captive in the underwater tomb of the slave ship hold—“*someone is trembling . . . he is fighting hard to leave his body which is a small bird trembling . . . there is no room to tremble so he is not able to die . . . those able to die are in a pile*.” That Paul D and the anonymous slave ship prisoner are described as having an identical somatic response to captivity suggests how spaces of racist terror have as much spectral force in

the novel as Sethe's ghost child—that what Morrison describes as Beloved's "miraculous resurrection" is coincident with and contingent upon the revival of the Middle Passage carceral model within the experiential present of characters in the text.<sup>31</sup>

This new understanding of the relationship between epochal racial/spatial violence and the ineluctable resurfacing of the dead in the novel offers an alternative point of entry into the meaning of Beloved and Paul D's sexual engagements. Most critical inquiries into this sexual bond have treated it solely from the perspective of Paul D: His physical encounters with the ghost-child-woman in the very shed where she was killed represent the beginning of his confrontation with the emotional contents of an injured selfhood that he has kept hidden, or repressed, within what Morrison describes as his "tobacco tin"—that is, his sealed-off heart.<sup>32</sup> An element of this bond largely ignored by critics until now, however, is its meaning from the point of view of Beloved. What little has been written on the subject has focused on its obvious meaning: her instigation of the union simply reflects her jealousy with respect to D's intimacy with Sethe. This would suggest that Beloved uses sex with Paul D as a pragmatic tactic, one that she knows will lead to D's self-imposed banishment from 124, a place that, from her perspective, has no room for the presence of a man—namely, one whose initial entrance into the dwelling led to her own temporary banishment, and one who, more importantly, represents a competing force for the attention of Sethe.

However, if we keep in mind Beloved's stream-of-consciousness rememory of her slave ship experience, we realize that sex with Paul D represents much more than a mere fit of jealousy over Sethe's love. The man who is described as "trembling," and who dies while pressed against Beloved's body on the slave ship, is also portrayed as an object of her affection, a sentiment that results from the unnamed man's gift of song: "Storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man . . . I love him because he has a song when he turned to die I see the teeth he sang through . . . his singing was soft. . . his song is gone now I love his pretty teeth instead."<sup>33</sup> This description reminds us that one of Paul D's defining characteristics is his tendency to break out into the songs he learned while slaving on the chain gang at any given moment, his uncanny ability to tap into Sethe's own repressed memories and feelings: "Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot. Windows suddenly had view. *And wouldn't you know he'd be a singing man.*"<sup>34</sup> From Beloved's perspective, Paul D's singing voice and his uncontrollable fits of trembling represent the possibility that the trembling/singing man she had lost to death in the slave ship hold has

been reincarnated—that she is not the only embodied ghostly passenger of the Middle Passage who has materialized in the space of 124. Beloved and Paul D’s lovemaking thereby signifies an attempt on Beloved’s part at re-creating the *mixing of man and woman* that occurred aboard the slave vessel on something close to her own terms rather than those imposed by the slave trader. She desires a consummation of two “living” bodies rather than the commingling of the dead and living dead that occurred in the hold. In this sense, Beloved’s spectral role is one not just of indiscriminate rage, jealousy, and “break-neck possessiveness”: her yearning for (re)union with Paul D is an expression of how slaves attempted to fashion sexual agency, intimacy, and love out of conditions bordering on death. For my purposes, the question of whether Paul D is actually the man whom Beloved desired during the Atlantic crossing is immaterial. What I am concerned with is the ways in which the experience of terror that D faced as a chain gang prisoner elicited the sort of somatic signs, emotional responses, and musical soundings that could easily be (mis)recognized as emanations of the slave ship experience.<sup>35</sup>

In discussing the recurrence of something perilously akin to the slave ship within the experiential present of characters in the text, several questions arise. Why does Morrison choose to focus on the chain gang camp as the primary connecting link to the “past” horrors of the slave ship? What is the function of the southern prison camp in a novel fixated on the haunting power of “Sweethome” slave plantation? What does the law’s conjuring of Paul D and Sethe’s attempts at escaping bondage into criminal offense say about the nature of black freedom after formal emancipation? And, finally, how do the expressions of a politics of wounded radicality on the part of those such as Sethe, Paul D, and his fellow chain gang captives represent the (im)possibilities of agency within zones of collective unfreedom? Again, I am interested in how the experience of Paul D and his forty-five fellow chain gang captives in particular, along with the dynamics of racialized imprisonment in the text in general, reveal how Morrison’s characters and action are haunted as much by the future as they are by the past.<sup>36</sup> Put another way, I am interested in how Morrison’s characters experience a cyclical or back-and-forth temporality and historicity wherein the past, present, and future exist in constant interface. From the perspective of the novel’s late antebellum plot, the labeling of the runaway slave as a transgressing *criminal* represents an ominous prefiguration of the postbellum branding of the black “criminal” as *slave of the state*.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, *Beloved* registers how acts of collective racial capitalist terror and enslavement have not been (and will not be) received without radical, if injurious, responses on the part of the unfree.

## The Racial Exception as Rule of American Law: The Radical Resurrection of the Alfred 46

In one of *Beloved's* numerous flashbacks, Paul D recalls how, after the collective escape attempt of himself, Sethe, Halle, Sixo, Paul A, and Paul F had been foiled, Schoolteacher placed a bit in his mouth. He was subsequently dragged away from Sweet Home by a rope, one end of which was lassoed around his neck, with the other attached to the back of his new owner's carriage. It was at this moment that he caught glimpse of "Mister," the plantation rooster—a bird who in the estimation of Paul D had been free to express more "manhood" than he had at Sweet Home. D remembers the look on Mister's face as the former was being hauled away from the plantation: "Then he saw . . . the rooster, smiling as if to say, *You ain't seen nothing yet*. How could a rooster know about Alfred, Georgia?" Mister's foreboding expression is corroborated by the treatment Paul D receives immediately upon his arrival at the prison camp, a point symbolized by the fact that it was the experience of living burial at Alfred, Georgia—not his enslavement at Sweet Home—which led to D's trembling fits. Indeed, the narrator alludes to the peculiar effects of the camp early in the text, the day after D arrives at 124, well before the chain gang scene actually unfolds: "The box had done to him what Sweet Home had not; Drove him crazy so he wouldn't lose his mind."<sup>38</sup>

I want to pursue the possibility that the dubious look of knowing in the rooster's eyes as Paul D is being hauled away from the slave plantation refers to much more than D's imminent experience of terror and dehumanization in Georgia—that the "you" of the *you ain't seen nothin' yet*, has a collective resonance that reaches forward into the actual lived reality of black people after Emancipation. When viewed from the experiential present of the novel's main characters—and from our present context of the prison industrial complex—Mister's glance not only portends Paul D's personal encounter with the chain gang; it also heralds the collective ordeal of many freed men, women, and children who have been subjected to prison slavery and to an overall state of siege and domestic warfare after the attainment of *de jure* freedom. Read in this light, the omen Paul D garners from Mister's stare registers the unsettling reality that the transition from slavery to freedom would lead to an amplification rather than abatement of injury, living death, and murder for many former slaves. This is symbolized by the clear correlation between Morrison's antebellum chain gang camp and the county chain gang camps of the postbellum era.

To fully understand what I mean by the “future orientation” of *Beloved* and the role of imprisonment in producing the forward-haunting aspects of the novel, we must first identify what can be thought of as Morrison’s use of *strategic anachronism* in the chain gang scene. With this term, I am referring to her intentional placement of a punitive regime normally associated with the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century into the context of the late antebellum period. The mechanism that the Alfred, Georgia, prison camp authorities use to entomb Paul D and his fellow captive fugitives, the “box” that “resembles a cage,” has a real postbellum historical referent: the portable chain gang “cage,” or “moving prison,” many of which were built in Georgia and distributed throughout the southern states. Both radical scholarship and muckraking accounts of early Jim Crow apartheid belie the earlier referenced claims on the part of chain gang administrators to the “comfort” and “sanitary” nature of the moving prison. In a *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* piece from 1933, Walter Wilson offers a more accurate picture:

The steel cage . . . wagon is ordinarily about 18 feet long, 8 feet high, and 8 feet wide with two or three tiers of bunks in each cage. This is the sleeping and living room for about 20 men. Because it can easily be moved with the progress of the job, the cage is especially suited for road work, if one doesn’t consider the welfare of the prisoners. It is a sight not soon forgotten to see the cages, which look all the world *like animal cages in a circus* . . . as they move to another job. Country people flock to the front gates to watch and listen as the procession of cages, loaded with vermin infested men, creaks and rasps along the hot, sandy, dusty road.

In rainy weather a tarpaulin flap is dropped over the walls of the cage to shut out the water; it also shuts off ventilation and light. A tub underneath a hole in the floor is the toilet. A horrible stench arises from it. . . . On Sundays, nights, and holidays the men are locked in the cages. *A long chain is passed through the leg chains of each prisoner*—these latter are permanently riveted on by the blacksmith. In this way all the prisoners are fastened to a single chain and can be released only by a guard unlocking them. Obviously such an arrangement has its good points, for fewer guards are necessary to watch fettered prisoners in a steel cage, and money is saved.<sup>39</sup>

The portable aboveground version of Morrison’s box was approximately eighteen to twenty feet in length and seven to eight feet wide, and was designed to hold from twelve to twenty-four men or boys. To fit so many prisoners into such a small space, the “cage” consisted of two parallel sections of three-tiered bunks with an access path running down the center and a hole cut in the middle of the walkway, through which prisoners were forced to urinate and defecate into a bucket placed on the ground below. The outer shell of these structures was either a lattice of wooden or metal bars that left the chain gang

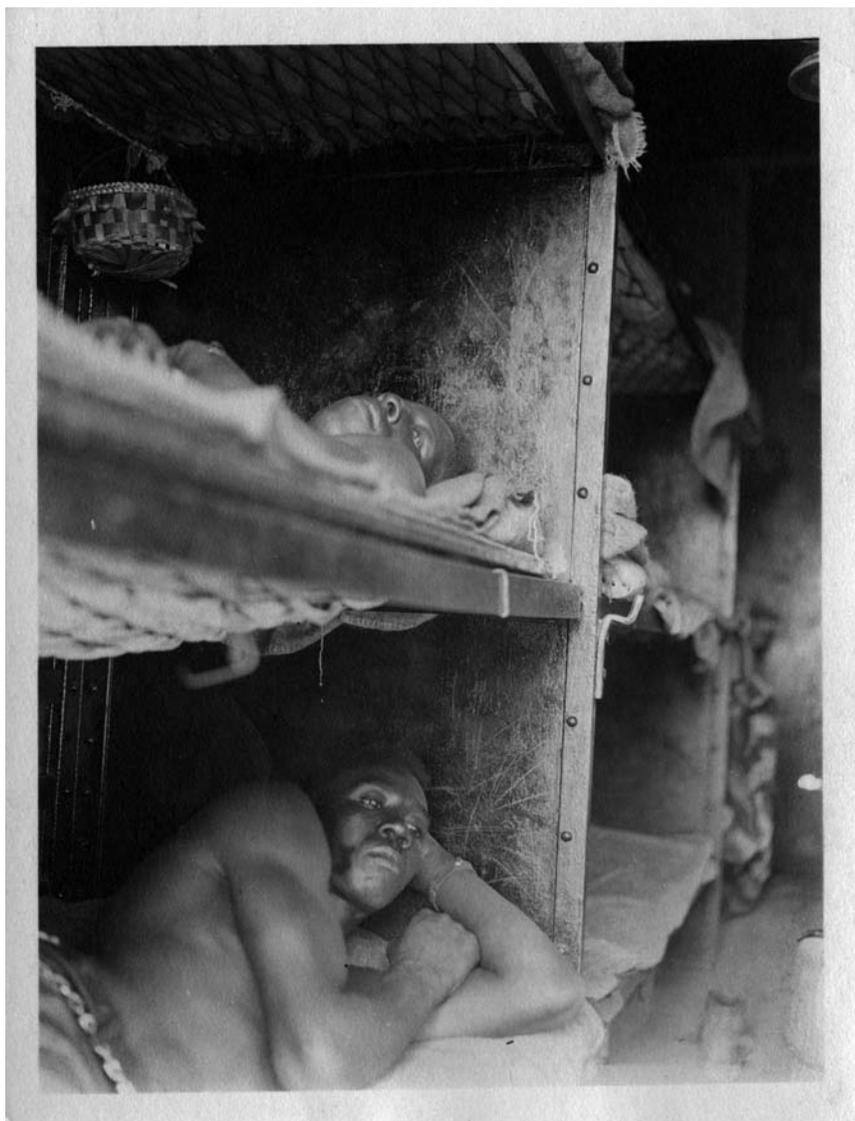
captive open to surveillance by camp guards and the public or four windowless wooden walls (fig. 1 and fig. 2).<sup>40</sup> This latter version of the rolling cage left prisoners with no view of the outside world and allowed them only a miniscule supply of breathable air—through a narrow slit running along the top of the structure.<sup>41</sup> As in the case of the slave ship, the moving cage immobilized its chained prisoners to such an extent that sitting up straight was impossible.

The dehumanizing aspects of these spaces of racial capitalist terror register the affiliations of the prison architectures of slavery and freedom. More specifically, in terms of its properties of defilement and tier-style human cargoing, the land-based moving prison of Jim Crow apartheid revived, on a smaller scale, the horror endured by those entombed within the water-based moving prisons of the Atlantic. That Morrison situates her version of the chain gang cage within the late antebellum period rather than its “proper” postslavery context analogizes the porous and vertiginous nature of the 1865 border from the standpoint of black captives. The doubling of racialized prison architectures across ostensibly separate historical junctures highlights the temporal and spatial dislocation experienced by the enslaved prisoner, whereby any attempt at distinguishing past and present modalities of entombment is rendered nearly impossible.

Like Paul D and his forty-five fellow prisoners in the late antebellum chain gang, those free black people who were rounded up and detained at chain gang camps for misdemeanor “crimes” such as vagrancy, breach of contract, petty larceny, loitering, public nuisance, drinking, and gambling faced circumstances bordering on, and crossing the border into, what Giorgio Agamben describes as *conditio inhumana*.<sup>42</sup> For Agamben, the horrifying conditions of the Nazi concentration camp resulted from a “state of exception”—an extreme political situation wherein the sovereign or state executive suspends constitutional rights and the rule of law in order to “protect” the state against a reputed enemy. The declaration of the exception in relation to Jews, Gypsies, queer subjects, communists, and others labeled as “internal and external enemies of the state” resulted in the Nazi concentration camp, a space wherein human “life” was turned into an approximation of death. As Agamben explains, “because [camp prisoners] were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to be situated at a limit zone between life and death.”<sup>43</sup> He

**Figure 2.**

Two prisoners in a Georgia chain gang cage, early 1930s. Original caption in John Spivak’s novel *Georgia Nigger* read: “Sick convicts in a cage: Stripped to the waist because of the intense heat.” Photo courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.



adds that these conditions of living death, along with the serialized murder that took place at the camp, represented the deployment by the Nazi state of what he calls “thanatopolitics”—a more openly coercive and sanguinary form of Foucault’s “biopolitics,” where modern state power has more to do with the power to kill than it does with the micromanagement and disciplining of the living. Along these lines, a main function of state sovereignty in the modern era has to do with crafting an enemy so defamed that they come to represent a “life that may be killed without the commission of homicide.”<sup>44</sup> For Agamben, the concentration/death camp is the ultimate symbol of the exception, whose place in (or outside of) law clearly distinguishes it from what Foucault describes as “the modern prison.” Agamben insists that the exception is exemplified in the “camp—and *not the prison*,” that “*prison law constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order*, the juridical constellation that guides the camp . . . is martial law and the state of siege. This is why it is not possible to inscribe the analysis of the camp in the trail opened by the works of Foucault.”<sup>45</sup>

In *Beloved*, Morrison’s portrayal of the carceral according to a black diasporic historical and temporal axis blurs any such clear distinction between the exceptional conditions of the concentration camp and the various formations of imprisonment to which black captives and other Third World peoples have been subjected from the colonial period in the Americas through the present.<sup>46</sup> A major problem with Agamben’s comparison of “the camp” to “the prison” has to do more with historiography than methodology. He relies upon Michel Foucault’s prison history, one that somehow manages to offer a detailed account of Western carceral regimes from feudalism to modernity without giving as much as a passing reference to how slavery or colonialism fit into the picture: prison spaces such as the barracoon, the slave ship, slave pen, plantation, and chain gang camp are not counted as nodes on what he describes as the Western “carceral archipelago.” These glaring omissions disclose how the feudal-modern polarity outlined in *Discipline and Punish* depends on a complete disregard for the centrality of slavery and colonialism in the production of Western carceral formations and in the unfolding of occidental modernity as a whole. Morrison’s centering of the Middle Passage and the plantation as primal sites of racialized punishment forces us to reevaluate what we are referring to when we speak of “the prison.” She reveals how the slave ship and the plantation operated as spatial, racial, and economic templates for subsequent models of coerced labor and human warehousing—as America’s original prison industrial complex. Her characters’ experiences symbolize the degree to which, from slavery to neoslavery, surveillance, incarceration, and

collective punishment have made *normal life* tantamount to a state of siege, if not all-out war, for those branded as internal aliens or natural-born enemies of the state on the basis of the social construct of race.<sup>47</sup>

Analysis of the integral functionality of white supremacy in relation to U.S. carceral modes in particular, and to Western imperialist mass violence in general, short-circuits the major historical claim of Foucault's project: the idea that with the transition from feudalism to modernity, punishment became less public and physically repressive, and more psychologically coercive, refined, and "administratively decent."<sup>48</sup> This historical and theoretical blind spot explains Foucault's mistaken claim that the chain gang was discontinued as a punitive institution in the early nineteenth century, when it ended in France, an ironic historiographic oversight considering that America's more repressive brand of the chain gang system would operate well into the twentieth century—that is, until some two decades before the publication of *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>49</sup> Although the theoretical import of Foucault's analysis of modern disciplinary regimes cannot be denied, the experience of Africans, indigenous peoples, and other colonized and enslaved collectives within locales of Western imperialism belie any categorical separation of premodern and modern methods of violence and social control.<sup>50</sup> Again, the measure of necropolitics and the state of (legal) exception in spaces such as the slave ship hold, the chattel slave plantation, the postbellum prison plantation, and the portable chain gang camp cannot be reduced to biological death rates—though, as David Oshinsky has pointed out, such rates in the case of postbellum prison camps ranged from 10 to 40 percent.<sup>51</sup> For those such as Paul D and the real-life referents for his experience of neoslavery, conditions of terror and abjection made biological life tantamount to living death. To limit our conception of thanato/necropolitics to biological death counts is to negate the genocidal reach of imperialist sovereignty in its protean methodologies of killing.

If the radical temporality of Morrison's narrative of neoslavery is registered largely by its exposition of the time-bending capacities of racialized imprisonment, then its full measure cannot be understood without attending to the modes of resistance within the text that function as replays of transatlantic and plantation rebellion. In a moment that recalls the perilous and tenuous nature of collective rebellion during chattel slavery, the "Alfred 46" are delivered from their underground living burial. As the waters of a torrential rainstorm fill the muddy trench in which they are buried, the forty-six chain gang captives act in unison to release themselves by yanking the "long-chain" that held them in the underground cage: "They talked through the chain like Sam Morse and . . . they all came up. Like *the unshriven dead*, zombies on the

loose, *holding the chains in their hands*, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly . . . each other.”<sup>52</sup>

Morrison’s description of the newly freed men as “zombies” registers both the paradoxical capacities of attempted agency and collective action on the part of those facing the most abject forms of dominance and how—within the context of continued collective subjection—the “success” of such acts of rebellion cannot most often be described as a clean break from unfreedom. Indeed, as the *aruwhoolie* or work song that the forty-six men perform before their prison break makes clear,<sup>53</sup> the history of black diasporic resistance to formations of prison terror has as much to do with the reclamation of the story of one’s servitude as it does with a miraculous inversion of power dynamics. During the song, they imagine beating their chain gang boss to a pulp, even as they sound their collective state of living death: “More than the rest, they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it; that another stroke of time would do it at last.”<sup>54</sup> Paul D’s rearrest and enslavement in Delaware by a company tellingly called “*Northpoint* Bank and Railway” soon after his escape from the chain gang brings into stark relief the tenaciousness of formations of (neo)slavery, even for those who reach points north of the Mason-Dixon line.

The enormity of racialized carceral genocide in the United States and its continued accretion into/within our current moment both domestically and globally disallows any model of tidy or triumphalist resistance. In her literary exhumation of the American chain gang box from the Georgia mud (and from the dustbin of liberal bourgeois history), Morrison re-sounds Almirar Cabral’s warning to global freedom fighters to “claim no easy victories.”<sup>55</sup> For those who, up to the point of this writing, continue to contend with modern reconfigurations of the slave ship and the chain gang box, what Saidiya Hartman defines as “redressive action” can often only be indexed at the level of the captive’s ability to render an alternative truth to that which led to her captivity—a de-marginalization of disqualified stories.<sup>56</sup> Morrison’s narrative unburial of the chain gang box shows how the act of subverting master narratives of black criminality and notions of liberal progress are a primary zone within which radicality can be marshaled even as state (living) death counts continue to mount and collective substantive freedom seems all but impossible. It involves asserting the right to testify to one’s own situation of abjection rather than allowing it be transmuted into the well-worn national fable of natural-born black criminality. In this light, the ownership of one’s own story of terror—a testifying to one’s own pain—signals a branch of black and subaltern agency that reaches as far back as the slave ship. This element of

circular temporality represents the incomplete nature of domination and the degree to which the Middle Passage carceral model produces its own excesses, “zombies” whose resurfacing challenges white supremacist plotlines of history.<sup>57</sup> In his reunion with Sethe at the close of *Beloved*, Paul D recognizes his own hard-won power of narration—of saying the unsayable that he has repressed for so long: “Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood. . . . He wants to put his story next to hers.”<sup>58</sup> Read in this light, the narrative of neoslavery—Morrison’s (re)placement of the stories of the Middle Passage, the plantation, and the chain gang at the center of U.S. nation building—represents a radical reclamation of stolen histories and bodies.

As Joy James reminds us, modes of radical theorization are not the sole property of academics—radical epistemologies (or what the late VèVè Clark often described as “epistemic breaks”)—often emerge from spaces of death and abjection rather than from those of liberal bourgeois privilege.<sup>59</sup> No narrative of neoslavery explodes facile models of diachronic history more than George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970), an epistolary manifesto composed while he was a political prisoner in California penitentiaries for ten years, seven of which were spent in solitary confinement. Jackson’s subjection to protracted isolation operated as the condition of possibility for what, to my knowledge, constitutes the first full-fledged theorization of what he defines as *neoslavery*.<sup>60</sup>

In a letter dated April 1970, composed after he had already endured seven years of solitary confinement for his interracial organizing and radical writings from behind prison walls, Jackson registers in poetic form the continuities of his experience and that of slave ship prisoners:

*My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who have fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, “unto the third and fourth generation,” the tenth, the hundredth. My mind ranges back and forth through the uncounted generations, and I feel all that they have felt, but double. I can't help it; there are too many things to remind me of the 23½ hours [a day] that I'm in this cell. Not ten minutes pass without a reminder. In between, I'm left to speculate on what form the reminder will take.*<sup>61</sup>

Jackson’s total recall of chattel slavery is catalyzed by the material and experiential imbrications of the slave *hold* and prison *hole*. Here the process of indefinite isolation represents the zero degree of what he describes throughout his letters as *neoslavery*. The solitary prisoner is not only removed from lines of biological kinship but from social contact altogether, a fact that explains

his testimony of feeling everything that chattel slaves felt “but double.” Like the chain gang cage, Middle Passage carcerality expressed as indefinite solitary involves a radical disorientation of temporal experience; in other words, the articulation of racial and spatial terror in the context of the northern/western prison warps time insofar as the experiential present is haunted in a material fashion by *past*, or *southern*, modes of racial capitalist repression.<sup>62</sup> As Colin (Joan) Dayan suggests, although “the resurrection of slavery is often discussed in the turn to convict labor and the criminalization of blacks in the postbellum South . . . the penitentiary . . . especially ‘solitary,’ also known as ‘the discipline’ or ‘the separate system’—offered an unsettling counter to servitude, an invention of criminality and prescriptions for treatment that turned humans into the living dead.”<sup>63</sup> The unsettling continuities between Jackson’s experience and that of chattel slaves past is registered in his subtle remapping of the “passage” as more than simply a southern or water-based phenomenon. For him “the millions who have fertilized the Amerikan soil” cannot be separated from the countless bones lining the Atlantic. Through his experientially based poetics of living death Jackson insists that the process of mass murder that began on the Atlantic continued right through his own (living) entombment in a “land-based slave ship” on the liberal West Coast.

This is not to treat the slave ship, the plantation, the U.S prison camp, and the German concentration camp as homological as exactly the same, but to point out that the implementation of racial enmity and othering as techniques in the creation of banishable, enslavable, and murderable masses is a process that did not begin with—nor end with the defeat of—the Third Reich.<sup>64</sup> Along with the colonized peoples of the global South, the “free” black subject of the Jim Crow apartheid era represented life that had been devalued to the extent that it could be reenslaved, killed, dispossessed, or subjected to living death with impunity. The existence of the moving prison—and its direct relation to the slave ship—reveals how, in the United States, *conditio inhumana* have often been a function of rather than an exception to the “normal” processes of law and order. Indeed, such conditions for blacks under both the law of slavery and the law of neoslavery have had to do, not with the state’s creation of an exception to law, but with the fact that the “Negro” subject has historically been viewed as a *biological and metaphysical exception to the rule of (white) humanity*—as the antithesis of order, rationality, morality, and productivity—and as a natural-born enemy or “Problem” of the state.<sup>65</sup>

In terms of the chain gang and early postbellum prison slavery in general, the ideological construction of blacks as quasi-human was not simply an example of southern anachronism, a fact indexed by the direct funding of the chain

gang by federal public roads monies. One particular engineer representing the federal Office of Public Roads registered northern culpability with respect to southern neoslavery in a way that rivaled the worst paternalism of plantation slavery. He argued that the “*human material dealt with [on the chain gang] is . . . so radically different from other sections*” it demanded techniques that would be considered inhumane if deployed against whites.<sup>66</sup> Only in this case, as Lichtenstein points out, chain gang neoslavery differed uniquely from its agrarian forerunner in that the enslaved would be exploited in the service of revamping the southern economy in the image of northern modernity and industrialization.

The direct correlation between Morrison’s “box” and the postbellum “cage” suggests that, in creating the chain gang scene, Morrison was acutely aware of how the dehumanizing methods found on the slave ship not only reemerged in antebellum spaces of horror such as Sweet Home plantation, but that the slave ship also haunted the experience of black people after emancipation. Along these lines, Stephanie Smallwood’s theorization of the insufficiency of linear models of space-time in reference to the slave’s experience of transatlantic imprisonment applies directly to the black experience of collective entombment after Emancipation. As Smallwood points out, “the slave ship chartered no course of narrative continuity between the African past and the American present, but rather memorialized an indeterminate passage marked by the impossibility of full narrative closure.”<sup>67</sup>

My reading of *Beloved* as a narrative of neoslavery forces us to reconsider the narrative closure insinuated by the stirring moment of community action that concludes the novel. This is not to diminish the historical and cultural import of the black women’s wailing exorcism of 124, which rids Sethe and themselves of the ghost(s) of chattel slavery and the Middle Passage. Indeed, when read along with the equally dramatic moment of black male communal action that frees Paul D and his fellow captives from the chain gang box, the black women’s collective gesture of healing and redress stands as a signal of how resistance has long been the unpredictable excess of the formations of (neo)slavery. To read the novel’s conclusion as a tidy closing of the book of Middle Passage carcerality, however, would be to impose a linear time framework belied by the characters’ experience of spatial and temporal disjunction throughout the entire text. Morrison’s radically circular time-space structure represents a narrative unburial of the undead vestiges of America’s prison/slavery past. If we listen closely to the wailing of the women surrounding 124, we can still hear the sounds of living death emitting from the Georgia chain gang and the screams from the slave/prison ships of the Atlantic crossing, not

only as they reverberate throughout Morrison's text, but as they continue to be sounded from places such as Folsom, Attica, and Abu Ghraib by the 2.3 million and more of the U.S. prison state. Such a reading of domestic and global imprisonment as an indeterminate Middle Passage calls upon all of us to follow the example of community protection exhibited by the women who surrounded 124—that we continue to wail loudly for an end to prison slavery and racial capitalism.

#### Notes

1. "Prison and Jail Inmates, 1995," U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Statistics, August 1998, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/pji95.htm/> (accessed April 12, 2008).
2. North Carolina Department of Correction, press release, November 1, 1994, [www.doc.state.nc.us/NEWS/1996/96news/oldcages.html/](http://www.doc.state.nc.us/NEWS/1996/96news/oldcages.html/) (accessed June 10, 2008).
3. Ibid.
4. Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (London: Verso, 1996), 185. See also David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Milfred Fierce, *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Convict Lease System 1865–1933* (New York: City University of New York, 1994); Angela Y. Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," in *The Angela Davis Reader*, ed. J. James (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 74–95; and Matthew Mancini, *One Dies Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).
5. Walter Wilson, *Forced Labor in the United States* (New York: International, 1933), 80 (emphasis added).
6. For my analysis of haunting within zones of state terror, I am indebted to Avery Gordon's incisive work, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
7. The Security Housing Unit, or "SHU," refers to prisons or sections of prisons wherein individuals are subjected to twenty-three-plus hour a day solitary confinement in six-by-eight-foot cells that often have "box-car" style windowless steel doors designed for total sensory deprivation. For more on the use of isolation as a technique in modern racialized punishment see Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 223–56. See also George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 233; Melvin Farmer, *The New Slave Ship* (Los Angeles: Milligan Books, 1998).
8. My essay has been influenced by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's brilliant analysis in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 30–86, 95–112. I take issue, however, with Gilmore's attempted refutation of the argument that the prison industrial complex (PIC) represents an extension and reconfiguration of slavery. For her, that most of those entombed within the modern penitentiary are not actually producing goods for corporations registers the insufficiency of the "new slavery argument" (20–21). In my study, however, I read the mass human warehousing of today's PIC as a direct analogue of the cargoing of human beings that took place during chattel slavery. That those who are subjected to the civil death of imprisonment are not performing labor for the open market—at least not on a large scale—in no way diminishes the reality that they serve as the literal raw materials, or *human commodities*, for a multibillion-dollar punishment industry. The object of human commodification in today's neoslavery is therefore not the neoslave's *labor* but her warehoused *body* and the nexus of profitability resulting

from her natal alienation and civil/living death. As Steven Dozinger explains, companies “that service the criminal justice system need sufficient quantities of raw materials to guarantee long term growth. . . . In the criminal justice field *the raw material is prisoners*, and industry will do what is necessary to guarantee a steady supply.” Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 94.

For incarceration rate of young black males see “One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008,” The Pew Center on the States, 6, [www.pewcenteronthestates.org/](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/) (accessed April 12, 2008).

9. Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 239.
10. Robert Broad, “Giving Blood to the Scraps, Haints, History, and Hosea in *Beloved*,” *African American Review*, 28.2 (Summer 1994): 189–97.
11. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 210–11, emphasis added.
12. Daniel Mannix, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Viking, 1962), 106, emphasis added.
13. *Ibid.*, 106–7.
14. Joseph Inikori and Stanley Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies, and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1982); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Race, Terror, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 225; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 150–51; Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 233.
15. See also Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 234–37.
16. Morrison, *Beloved*, 200, emphasis added.
17. Colin (aka Joan) Dayan, “Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies,” in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. Russ Casronovo and Dana Nelson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 69.
18. Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 233–37. See also Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd, 439–48 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
19. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17–48.
20. Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse,” 446–47; see also Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
21. Sylvia Wynter, address at “The State and Soul of Jamaica” conference, University of California, Berkeley, March 31, 1993.
22. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17–48; 140–45.
23. George Frances Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving* (Cambridge, Md.: Cornell Maritime Press, 1968), xix (emphasis added).
24. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36.
25. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11–40.
26. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
27. Morrison, *Beloved*, 29.
28. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 125, 135.
29. Morrison, *Beloved*, 106, emphasis added.
30. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
31. *Ibid.*, 105, emphasis added.
32. See, for example, David Lawrence, “Fleshy Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*,” in *Toni Morrison’s Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David Middleton (New York: Garland, 1996), 231–46.
33. Morrison, *Beloved*, 211–12.
34. *Ibid.*, 39 (emphasis added).
35. The interconnected spatial and racial frameworks of the slave ship, the plantation, and the chain gang are also registered by Paul D and his fellow chain gang captives’ experience of sexual violence and rape—central techniques of (neo)slavery, sadism, and punishment that are also central to today’s prison industrial complex.
36. See also Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.

37. In *Ruffin v. Commonwealth* (1871), Justice J. Christian asserted the idea that as a “slave of the state” the prison laborer had no constitutionally protected rights, and was consequently “civiliter mortuus”—that is, civilly dead. *Ruffin v. Commonwealth* 62 VA 790 (1871): 795–96.
38. Morrison, *Beloved*, 41.
39. Walter Wilson, “Chain Gangs and Profit: The Economic Basis of Our American Siberia,” *Harper’s*, April 1933, 539–40 (emphasis added).
40. For a photo documentation of the chain gang cage and other aspects of the prison slavery, see John Spivak’s muckraking novel *Georgia Nigger* (1932; repr., Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969). See also W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (New York: Antheneum, 1992), 698.
41. See Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 698, and Spivak, *Georgia Nigger*.
42. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 166.
43. *Ibid.*, 159.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis added).
46. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (London: Monthly Review Press, 1972); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1991); Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics.”
47. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 17, 23.
48. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 263.
49. *Ibid.*, 263–64.
50. Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 24–29; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 138.
51. Oshinsky adds that, in 1882, “126 of 735 black state convicts perished, as opposed to 2 of 83 whites. Not a single leased convict ever lived long enough to serve a sentence of ten years or more”; in 1870, Alabama officials “reported that more than 40 percent of their convicts had died, prompting a doctor to warn that if the trend continued, the entire convict population would be wiped out within three years.” Oshinsky, “*Worse Than Slavery*,” 46, 79.
52. Morrison, *Beloved*, 110, emphasis added.
53. For analysis of the *arwhoolie*, see Sterling Brown, “Folk Literature” (1941), in *A Son’s Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Mark A. Sanders (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996, 221–22; and Amiri Baraka [Leroi Jones], *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 67–68.
54. Morrison, *Beloved*, 109.
55. Almicar Cabral, “Tell No Lies, Claim No Easy Victories,” in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 86.
56. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 61–78. See also Wynter, “On Disenchanted Discourse,” 443–57; and Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, 75–144.
57. For a discussion of anticolonial renderings of the zombie figure within Caribbean literature, see Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, “Colonial and Post-Colonial Gothic: The Caribbean,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 248–53.
58. Morrison, *Beloved*, 273.
59. Joy James, “American ‘Prison Notebooks,’” *Race & Class* 45.3 (2004): 35–44. See also Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), and Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*.
60. See also Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women and the Family, from Slavery Through the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 153.
61. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 234, emphasis added.
62. The indefinite quarantining of political prisoners such as Jackson functioned as a testing ground for today’s supermaximum security prisons and special housing units. The trend of converting either a section or an entire prison into a “lockdown” zone wherein prisoners spend 23.5 or more hours a day in solitary confinement had its methodological beginning at Marion Prison, Illinois, in 1981.

63. Dayan, "Legal Slaves and Civil Bodies," 69.
64. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*.
65. Wynter, "On Disenchanted Discourse."
66. Alex Lichtenstein, "Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South: 'The Negro Convict is a Slave,'" *Journal of Southern History* 59.1 (February 1993): 85–110.
67. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 207.