

Anti-Black Violence and Toni Morrison’s Democratic Storytelling

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More people are mobilized in response to the deaths of Black men than those of Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw understands this asymmetry as being rooted in Black women’s lack of “narrative capital” and has called on women to “share their stories” of violence to occasion greater mobilization. In this essay, I argue that the work of Toni Morrison, and specifically her conception of *truant democracy*, provides a blueprint for how and with whom Black women should share their stories—that is, for how they should mobilize the narrative capital they have and build more. I make this argument by juxtaposing the democratic visions of Morrison and W. E. B. Du Bois, including the ethical foundations of their envisioned democracies, the forms of violence to which they attend, their visions of justice, and the people—or, in Morrison’s case, the ephemeral collectives—they sought to build via storytelling.

There’s never been a moment in our society where there’s been a reckoning with the particular kinds of violence that’s meted out against Black women.

—Kimberlé Crenshaw,
quoted in Beckett and Clayton 2021.

Black women constitute 10% of the US female population, yet they make up 59% of women murdered (Waller, Joseph, and Keyes 2024, 1). Indeed, while men are more likely to be killed than women, Black women are more likely to be killed than white men (Threadcraft and Miller 2017). But not all deaths are created equal. Men are more likely to be killed in public—on the street, at sporting events, or in bar fights (Bonn 2015). Women, when they are killed, are more often killed in private and for reasons related to intimacy, sex, and sexuality. Catherine D’Ignazio notes that men “are not frequently violated and killed in their homes,” and in contemporary America “men’s bodies are not typically desecrated in brutal and sexualized ways” (2024, 28), though lynching is an important recent counter example. Even when women are killed by the police, these deaths usually take place inside the home and are connected to the victims’ intimate relationships, as when police killed Breonna Taylor because they were looking for her former partner (Crenshaw 2012).

Black femicide is defined as the misogynoiristic killing of Black women because they are Black women *or* the misogynistic killing of Black women because they are women facilitated by structural racism as it intersects with a variety of other oppressive social conditions. Black femicide is a serious problem. Mortality

data from 30 states shows that from 1999 to 2020, Black women aged 25 to 44 were six times more likely to be murdered than their white counterparts. Most of those deaths were the result of intimate partner violence. Black women account for 44.6% of pregnancy-related fatal intimate partner violence (Waller, Joseph, and Keyes 2024, 9, 1). Reproductive violence and obstetric racism are also factors (Davis 2018). Pregnancy- and abortion-related deaths are forms of passive femicide, and Black women are at least three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than white women (Njoku et al. 2023; UN Women 2014).

The rate of death is not only utterly sobering but also on the rise: a Black woman was killed by her intimate partner every 19 hours in 2015, whereas one was killed every 6 hours in 2022 (Solarte-Erlacher 2022). The intimate partner violence Black women experience is made more deadly by a surrounding context of workplace discrimination and related resource deprivation, including housing insecurity, medical neglect, and inadequate public safety provision. Societal hierarchies are a factor as well, as homophobia, transphobia, femmephobia, and stereotypes that normalize violence against women who defy gender norms—including sex workers, single mothers, and transwomen—expose Black women to disproportionate violence and premature death.

Despite this bleak picture, the most widespread activism regarding premature Black death is in response to the deaths of Black men. The pioneering legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who has been a significant voice calling attention to Black femicide and violence against Black women (D’Ignazio 2024), laments the lack of large-scale mobilization in response to Black women’s deaths. Crenshaw (2019) understands this mobilization asymmetry as being partially rooted in Black women’s lack of “narrative capital,” and she has called for Black women to “share their stories” of violence to redistribute this capital in Black communities and increase mobilization in response to

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women's deaths. Yet doing this is more complicated than simply sharing stories because women do not offer their stories in a narrative vacuum. Most Black women die "unspectacularly," in private and in the context of intimate relationships. At the same time, Black political leaders, most notably W. E. B. Du Bois, have written spectacular violence, and specifically lynching, into the story of who Blacks are and why they are here—that is, into the story of Black peoplehood. They have done so by tying lynching to Christian martyrdom, to the biblical crucifixion. Therefore, those who call on Black women to share their stories of private violence must reflect not only on the difficulty of sharing these stories of violent intimacy publicly but also on how unintelligible these stories are, given the dominant narrative of Black peoplehood.

In this essay, I argue that the work of Toni Morrison, and specifically her conception of truant democracy, provides a blueprint for how and with whom Black women should share their stories—in other words, for how they should mobilize the narrative capital they already possess and build more. I make this argument by juxtaposing the democratic visions of Du Bois and Morrison, including the ethical foundations of their envisioned democracies, the forms of violence to which they attended in the struggle for multiracial democracy, and the people—or, in Morrison's case, the ephemeral collectives—they each sought to build via storytelling.

Morrison envisions a form of democracy practiced not by broad sections of the population but principally among those who have experienced intimate injustice, both survivors and—via forms of what Rebecca Louise Carter (2019) has called "restorative kinship"—those who have not survived. Morrisonian democracies not only affirm the political significance of the sexual and reproductive violence that is at the heart of Black femicide but also aim to create the conditions for sexual freedom and enact the reparative reproductive justice that is absent from Du Bois's account of abolition democracy. Morrisonian democracies sidestep the surrounding spectacular-violence-attentive context—a context not only of gynecological and obstetric injustice but one in which Black women's bodies have long counted for more than their words, a context of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice and profound misrecognition—to tend equally to bodies and words. Squarely taking on the hermeneutical injustice and misrecognition Black women face in the wider society, they are spaces of language creation. In this way, they mirror the project of their champion, Morrison, to transform "inarticulate places into conversational territories" (Holland 2000, 3–4).

Storytelling is central to the process: survivors and those who have passed on share stories in truant, ephemeral collectives with those who have experienced similar injustices. Morrison emphasizes affirmation and recognition over persuasion, but her democracies can also be agonal spaces, and participants are never discouraged from exercising their capacities for judgment. Morrisonian democracies are spaces not only of storytelling, testimony, language creation, deliberation,

reflection, and ultimately of collectively produced action but also of bodily healing, of touch and the laying on of hands. Morrison shows us, then, that it is perhaps no tragedy that Black women have not had the great reckonings Crenshaw seeks, as those who have experienced intimate injustice may not need to turn to the wider population, but to themselves and their sisters alone.

DU BOIS, BLACK PEOPLEHOOD, AND THE PROBLEM OF SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE

Lynching is an important frame that activists, academics, journalists, civil society organizations, and others have used to make sense of contemporary police violence. Historian Karlos K. Hill (2016) points out that "at the current moment, some African Americans are using the history of white on Black lynching, and particularly victimization narratives of the lynched Black body, to make sense of recent police killings." Among the critical antiracist observers making such comparisons are NAACP president Cornell Williams Brooks, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016), and Isabel Wilkerson (2014). Brooks promised in a speech at St. Paul's Progressive Baptist Church, "We will stand up and stand against police misconduct, police brutality, and we will bring this twenty-first lynching to an end" (quoted in Magan 2016). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 intensified comparisons between police killings and lynching. Floyd's brother Phillonese announced before the House Judiciary Committee at its hearings on racial injustice and police brutality: "They lynched my brother. That was a modern-day lynching, in broad daylight" (quoted in Morgan and Cowan 2020). This sentiment was echoed by Cornel West (Democracy Now 2020), president of Emerson College M. Lee Pelton (2020), legal scholar Mitchell F. Crusto (2020), and an independent sexual violence advisor, Lyla Smith-Abass of Survivors UK, who penned a poem, "The Lynching of George Floyd" (Smith-Abass 2023).

This linkage between police killings today and lynching, a phenomenon commonplace a century ago, is reflected in the scholarly understanding of lynching as formative for Blacks. Elizabeth Alexander (1994) has argued that spectacular violence, with lynching at its apex, created Blacks as a "we." Violence is what "throws" us together, she says. "We" learn who "we" are through our encounters with, storytelling about, and reenactments of public violence against "us"—storytelling in which our bodies are very much implicated. In Alexander's account, the experience of violence and the constant threat of violence under which Blacks live is significant, but Black collective memory actually forms through the act of collectively witnessing violence, as well as through the amplification of this act by sharing stories about spectacular violence. Dramatization of the violence provides the opportunity for those not initially present to become "witnesses once removed." The resulting "traumatic archive" of violence is stored in the minds and bodies of Black people, viscerally reinvented and reactivated at each new

antiblack violent event. Together, these acts of witness, storytelling, circulation, reinvocation, and reactivation not only create Blacks as a collective body but also help to construct the individual bodies of Black people. The violence depicted in slave narratives and lynching—specifically the lynching of Emmett Till—are the most important episodes in this formative archive of violence. In this sense, Alexander argues that violence made us. I would argue that this is the case in part *because of work done by W. E. B. Du Bois and others, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Aaron Douglas, to make this violence particularly meaningful by forging a connection between it and Black ethical virtues.*

Du Bois was not alone in centering lynching in his political work, nor was he the first to discover the power of lynching in Black political organizing. Indeed, it can be argued that he and the NAACP followed the people to a place where they had been led by the incomparable Ida B. Wells. Unlike Du Bois, however, Wells did not go the martyrdom route in her antilynching work, choosing instead the path of radical humanization, individuation, highlighting the arrestingly mundane features of lives cut short by violence (Wells [1917] 2014; Hooker 2023, 160–1). Victims were not united in their divine sameness but collected in their glorious individuality.

Antilynching activism began in the 1880s but only acquired “cohesive political force” after 1909, when the NAACP was founded and put antilynching work “at the forefront of its agenda” (Wood 2011, 183). The chief operator in this effort was Du Bois (1910–1922)—who chose his hero, Prussian minister Otto von Bismarck, as the subject of his first college graduation oration because Bismarck “made a nation out of bickering people”—and who helmed the NAACP’s influential monthly news organ *The Crisis* from 1910 to 1934. In this role, he embarked on a project of Black collective memory formation that helped to give lynching a central place in the Black American theodicy. Du Bois’s overriding concern was to weld together Blacks as a people. Through *The Crisis*, Du Bois “sought to forge a collective memory, a unique identity” (Kirschke and Sinitiere 2014, 39) for his readers. His training as a historian drove his concern with collective memory formation and his awareness of the role that group members played in confirming one another’s memories. Racism had functioned to alter Black identity and exclude Blacks from their place in American history. Du Bois felt that Black history had to be recovered and reconstructed with an eye toward creating a new collective identity (Kirschke and Sinitiere 2014, 38–9). Du Bois fostered a process of selecting and interpreting memories that would encourage the formation of an identity that could “serve the changing needs of African Americans” (Kirschke and Sinitiere 2014, 37). Lynching fit the bill of a traumatic experience that could function as a unifying event: “Lynching was an act that could unite the Black community through sorrow, but it needed to be owned by the Black community and used as a symbol to motivate and inspire action” (Kirschke 2014, 73). Du Bois wrested ownership of lynching from

its white perpetrators by rewriting the lynching story as the crucifixion story, and therefore as what Rogers Smith refers to as an “ethically constitutive” story, casting Black men into the “stirring roles” that ethically constitutive stories best do (Smith 2003, 73).

Du Bois was also by no means the first Black leader to concern himself with people-building narratives. Early-nineteenth-century Black political leaders used political rhetoric wherein the “national community was imagined in the character and events found in the Exodus story” (Glaude 2000, 53–4). This story was not mobilized to evoke ties of blood or in a quest for land but to highlight Blacks’ moral and civic obligations to one another to build racial solidarity. So pervasive was this rhetoric that by the mid-1840s, the Exodus metaphor was “the predominant political language,” and the analogy “diffused into the popular consciousness of black America,” such that “Exodus became the taken-for-granted context for any discussions of slavery and freedom” (56). What Du Bois did was transform the people-building work of predecessors including David Walker, Samuel Cornish, and John Russwurm with a new biblical story for a new era of unfreedom and racialized violence—one marked not by slave discipline but by the spectacular ritualistic and sacrificial violence of lynching.

Du Bois’s framing was more conducive to the elevation of a sacrificial ideal of manhood because it offered a response to the religious, ritual, and communal work that lynching was doing for white people and white peoplehood. Mass spectacle lynchings were white supremacist people-making rituals that “played a constitutive role in affirming and circulating the notion that the sovereign people were white, and that African Americans were their social subordinates” (Gorup 2020, 819). Lynchings were events at which the people were made manifest, seeking “to suture the people’s (racialized) body through the ritual performance of violent expulsion” (821). In a world of newly masterless slaves—a world thus teeming with domestic enemies and a social order upended and struggling through its transformation to a new era, spectacle lynchings can be understood as religious ritualistic human sacrifices (Mathews 2002, 20) or even cannibalistic blood sacrifices (Patterson 1999, 173, 175). Such blood sacrifice “enacts and symbolically recreates a disrupted or threatened social world and resolves through the shedding of blood, a specific crisis of transition”—a rite of passage not “for the individual but for the community” (175).

Du Bois responded to these changed violent circumstances as others did, by appropriating another important Biblical story in the service of Black people-building, one with an iconic scene of spectacular sacrificial violence. In the period 1880–1940, the lynching tree became “the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that Blacks have seen,” representing “both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope.” But it was not Black preachers who made this connection: it was artists and writers “who wrestled with the deep religious meaning of the ‘strange fruit’ that littered the American landscape” (Cone 2011,

105, 3, 97). One example is poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who in 1957 reflected on the mob violence in response to school desegregation in “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock” (Brooks 1963) and ended her poem with the line, “The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.” Artistic and literary giants like Brooks worked to link lynching to Christ’s sacrifice in the minds of their audience. Yet the quality of Du Bois’s intervention is unrivaled as the preeminent African American theologian James Cone held that no one tied lynching to the crucifixion “with more literary passion and creative theological insight”: “Black religion comes out of suffering,” Cone argues, “and no one has engaged the question of theodicy in the Black experience more profoundly than Du Bois” (2011, 101, 105).

Du Bois’s effort to tell the lynching story as a crucifixion story worked because of its compatibility with the Black religious worldview. It was a story that involved purifying suffering, and suffering is central to Black Christianity. Cornel West says that Blacks have understood their experience in America as a theodicy (West 2022, 35). Historically, Black Americans have responded to the moral evil of racism by finding solace in a concept of “redemptive suffering,” the dominant understanding of suffering in Black religious thought. Many Blacks from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries have understood racist evil as part of God’s way of teaching and purifying them (Pinn 1999). The narrative practice of linking lynching to crucifixion, then, worked well within a religious tradition of connecting Blacks’ experience of violence and the sacred (Blum 2009).

Yet Du Bois’s reworking of the crucifixion also raised the stakes, appropriating the Bible’s climatic story for political purposes, giving Blacks the opportunity to play one of history’s most stirring roles, and creating a narrative association with one of the world’s most valorized identities—that of Jesus Christ. Du Bois turned Black men in the throes of profane political, economic, and gendered conflict into spiritual martyrs. In so doing, he endowed purifying suffering with a new political purpose. In Du Bois’s hands, lynching was proof that Black men were indeed God’s favored children. The lynched man became a saint, related to the son of God, suffering as he suffered, and a potential savior of the American nation. Du Bois’s highly successful efforts to write lynching into the African American theodicy answered the important questions of who Blacks were and why they were here: They were real men, true patriots, more than saints. And they were here to save a most wayward nation (Blum 2009).

Du Bois wrote five stories in the period 1911 to 1933 that provide particularly good examples of his people-building storytelling. Four of these stories appeared in *The Crisis* as “Jesus Christ in Georgia” (1911), “The Gospel According to Mary Brown” (1919), “Pontius Pilate” (1920), and “The Son of God” (1933), while the fifth, “The Second Coming,” appeared in Du Bois’s essay collection *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920). In each of these stories, a Black Christ arrives amid the racialized political unrest of the Jim Crow South and casts his lot with Blacks in the struggle for

racial equality. Every time, the Black Jesus is crucified/lynched because of his association with Blacks and for espousing principles of racial equality consistent with his teachings. These tales, in which the struggle for racial equality becomes a divine one, “were an integral part of Du Bois’s challenge to racial and economic discrimination” (Blum 2009, 198, 191). His decision to connect lynching to the most theologically significant biblical story was a move with practical persuasive appeal. As Rogers Smith explains, “no political peoples are natural or primordial.” Rather, “people are human creations.” Humans create peoples, not spontaneously, but most often through the organizing work of “mobilizing leaders” like Du Bois, whose efforts arrange mass publics into new political communities. But leaders are not magicians. Those who would create new people are required to work with the material they have, including individuals and collectives “with entrenched economic interests, political and religious beliefs” (Smith 2003, 32, 36, 34). Given Du Bois’s collectivizing aims, the crucifixion story held tremendous advantages, not the least of which was that his audience, no matter what their level of literacy and exposure, would have been familiar with it.

Du Bois’s focus on the “ethical teachings” of Jesus, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, underlined “his conviction that Christianity was a religion of brotherhood and of liberation for the oppressed” (Blum 2009, 203). Indeed, Du Bois rewrote the Sermon on the Mount in “The Son of God,” which is told from the perspective of an abusive and skeptical Joseph—Joe—who comes to accept his wife’s unwavering conviction that her child, Joshua, is the son of God. “Behold the Sign of Salvation,” Mary tells her husband. It is “a noosed rope.” In Du Bois’s stories, Christ’s embodied virtues include the courageous confrontation of evil, self-sacrifice for one’s beliefs, loving one’s neighbor, and commitments to human brotherhood, asceticism, and pacifism. These are the same virtues Du Bois sought to encourage among the Black people.

The incidents that led to lynching were already connected to the confrontation of evil. Generally, the proximate incident was an assertion of political or economic equality—for example, standing up for one-self and the principle of racial equality in a labor dispute. Lynchings occurred, then, when Blacks directly confronted the evil of racial inequality, just as Jesus did, and that confrontation itself evinced the ethic of self-sacrifice, as all knew that it was dangerous to do so. Pacifism—that is, continuing to work for the peaceful resolution of disputes within the democratic process, continuing to work to repair the brotherhood of man, without begrudging all that this system had taken from Blacks materially—completed the ethic. “The Black Christ of Du Bois’s works,” Blum notes, “sympathized with oppressed African Americans” and “confronted the evils of white society with love, justice, and compassion; and then he died—or rather, was murdered.” But Du Bois departs from the New Testament in what happens next: in all but one of Du Bois’s tales, there is no resurrection. The omission is connected to Du Bois’s “general erasure of supernatural biblical events” in

these stories, pointing the reader toward his “view of Christianity as an ethical system” as well as to “his insistence that African Americans rely on themselves, rather than divine intervention for their liberation” (2009, 191, 201). The lynched man inspired as Jesus did. The Blacks whom the lynched man left behind, who gained his Christian virtues via their racial, historical, and, importantly, *political* association with the lynched man, were not attributed those virtues so that they might feel better about themselves and rest easy. They were left to do the work of resurrection via a self-sacrificing political struggle for Black liberation here on earth. Black Jesus was gone, and no one was coming to save them. They had to save themselves.

Du Bois came to see the work of resurrection as the construction of a multiracial democracy to be built on an abolitionist democratic foundation whereby all have the social, economic, and political means to live as equals (Du Bois [1933] 1998). Here, it is important to note that for Du Bois, as for the nation, not all Black suffering was created equal. Famously worried about normative family relations and sexuality, Du Bois certainly did not see Black women and their resistance to their suffering as playing a central role in saving Black people, much less the nation. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, he identified “sexual looseness” as “the prevailing sin of the mass of the Negro population” and traced “its prevalence to a bad home life in most cases.” Du Bois complained: “Children are allowed on the street night and day unattended; loose talk is often indulged in; the sin is seldom if ever denounced in churches.” In case there was any doubt of who was responsible for the “bad home life” that ultimately led to the “sexual looseness,” he outlined a taxonomy of Black households, with the highest grade given to families in which “the wife stays at home and the children at school.” The second grade went to families in which “the wife in some cases helps as breadwinner,” the third to “those who have suffered accident and misfortune; the maimed and defective classes and the sick; many widows and orphans and deserted wives.” His fourth and final grade went to homes wherein “many of these are cases of permanent cohabitation and the women for the most part are or were prostitutes” (Du Bois [1899] 2007, 364–5).

Feminist scholars have forwarded additional critiques of Du Bois for sidelining his Black female contemporaries and for his failures of analysis regarding Black women's political agency, even as they have given him credit for his early support for women's rights. James (1997) notes Du Bois's problematic “non-specificity” regarding Black women and his related tendency to idealize both their strength and their victimization. She also notes that he failed to reciprocate Ida B. Wells's support for him in his conflict with Booker T. Washington and that Du Bois sidelined Wells within the NAACP (1997, 35, 37, 47–50). Giddings (2008) argues that Du Bois did more than simply sideline Wells in the organization: the NAACP only gained legitimacy within the Black community when it made Wells's cause—antilynching activism—central to its work, appropriating her

methods, strategy, perspectives, and the publics she built in the process (2008, 7).

Elizabeth Alexander argues that “the focus in American narratives of [spectacular] violence against Blacks is usually male. The whipped slave, the lynched man, Emmett Till, Rodney King: all of these are familiar and explicit in the popular imagination” (1994, 90). The fact that Du Bois's ethically constitutive people-building narrative focused on the public sacrifice of the Black male body is significant in view of Alexander's argument that spectacular violence—violence that is witnessed and retold by and within collectives—created Blacks as a people. The relative absence of Black women from Du Bois's story of Black peoplehood poses a significant obstacle to overcome for feminists concerned with the private violence that Black women experience. Because men are more likely to experience forms of spectacular violence than others, they are more closely associated with Christ and his virtues. Women, then, become the stones that the people-builders rejected.

THE SPACE, ETHICS, AND TRANSCENDENT DEMOS OF MORRISONIAN DEMOCRACY

Toni Morrison presents a significant challenge to Du Bois regarding Black death and democracy. Morrison's conception of democracy has been called a “fugitive's democracy” (Balfour 2021), but I argue that we should also attend to Morrison's endorsement of a “truant democracy,” especially as it is enacted by her favorite practitioners, wayward women. Morrison did not, as Du Bois did, seek to build a stable yet insufficiently inclusive demos, or “we.” Instead, she focused on ephemeral collectives. Her democracy is concerned with addressing and repairing the intimate injustices at the heart of femicides. Like Ida B. Wells, Morrison chose radical humanization over martyrdom. Indeed, she chose to celebrate the flesh, the profane, while encouraging us to sustain and deepen our political connections to our morally transgressive feminine dead. I juxtapose Du Bois with Morrison because Morrisonian truant democracy is a feminist corrective to Du Bois's abolition democracy. It is no coincidence that her model citizens are the women he held in barely concealed contempt.

This account builds on and should be read alongside important feminist critiques of Du Bois. Most pointedly, it is an extension of Saidiya Hartman and Alys Weinbaum's accounts of the failures of Du Bois's radical democratic vision and of Weinbaum's analysis of how Black feminists have confronted these failures head on, providing their own feminist “propaganda of history” (Hartman 2016; Weinbaum 2013). It is equally indebted to Deborah Gray White and Stephanie Camp's notions of truancy in their pioneering analyses of women's experiences within enslavement, in particular to Camp's arguments regarding how truant “plaited” a rival geography into the terrain of captivity, creating momentary spaces for independent activity and meaning creation within a system of brutality (Camp 2004, 36; White 1999, 74). White's analysis

reveals that women, who sought to balance familial ties with the need for respite from the brutality of enslavement, most often chose truancy over flight. Without this powerful insight, I would not have understood as well what Morrison proposed. Finally, this account of Morrisonian truant democracy echoes Jasmine Syedullah's work on enslaved women and their descendants' congregational abolitionist praxis, which emphasizes not only stealing away for brief moments and gathering together but also the significance of testimony, storytelling, and the transformational impact of these practices on participants. "Congregation gathers around story, song, the breath," Syedullah writes, making space "in the face of a totalizing force of antiblackness." The task, then, "is to trace black feminist protocols of abolitionist aspirations that breathed new life into the future of black life through congregations of counter-discourses, through the physical exchange of stories, of accounts and witness that slipped the seeds of slavery's destruction past sediments of respectability and spread dissent like wildfire through captive encampments" (Syedullah 2022, 113). Burn baby burn.

While Du Bois and Morrison both engaged in reconstructive history and in democratic storytelling, Morrison's stories, the storytelling she models within them, and the communities her characters build around these stories provide a better model and method for confronting unspectacular Black female death. A survey of the two thinkers' work reveals significant differences in emphasis that culminate in distinctive, indeed divergent, democratic visions. While Du Bois was concerned with public things, Morrison occupied herself with secrecy, private deaths, and intimate injustices. Her work reflects on incest (*The Bluest Eye*, 1970), infanticide following sexual assault (*Beloved*, 1987), women killed because they have had sex (*Jazz*, 1992), women killed because they are women (*Paradise*, 1998), forced sterilization (*Home*, 2012), and more. Du Bois troubled himself a great deal with respectability politics. He took pains to call attention to the race's shining lights. Morrison, by contrast, chose to highlight and expound upon the inner lives of the disreputable, disrespected, and forgotten. Reflecting on Morrisonian democracy, Lawrie Balfour notes that Morrison "pays attention to the private or disregarded spaces of African American experience ... often places where communities of women gather, away from the imperatives of the patriarchal order" (2021, 550–1).

A bit of a somatophobe, Du Bois praised the ideal, the form, the self-sacrificial Christian virtues of the Sermon on the Mount. Morrison, by contrast, reserved her praise for the profane—literally, the flesh. The good news is delivered not on Mounts but in clearings. Take the sermon of Baby Suggs, holy, in *Beloved*: "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me,

they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck and put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up" (Morrison [1987] 2004, 103–4). We know that this was a deeply held belief for Morrison, as Baby Suggs would impart this somatophilic philosophy to her granddaughter Denver, who would repeat it for us: "Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it" (247). This is not a minor ethical distinction in a context in which the female body, sexuality—the flesh—is very much implicated in Black women's unspectacular deaths. Relatedly, the pillars of Morrison's democracy exceed schools, land, and political rights. They require somatophilic clearings that affirm and repair bodily autonomy, love, and care.

Morrison also presents a vision of democratic leadership that is distinct from that of Du Bois. Her leader is not the citizen-soldier of *Black Reconstruction*—though she too has survived tremendous conflict—nor is she a member of his Talented Tenth. She is most often socially marginalized, albeit a well-respected font of folk knowledge. She is a woman who has experienced intimate injustice and survived it and who remains at great risk of further intimate injustice. As a survivor—or, as in the case of *Paradise's* Connie, one who may not have survived—her leadership is driven by a calling to help a woman in need. The leader initiates collective action, healing, and dialogue. She gives she who is in need a "talking to." Following her lead, participants register not simply their consent but their ongoing agreement through their teamwork. Among the important effects created by her actions is the space for speech, reflection, and judgment for she who needs help. The process of speaking, of collective storytelling, helps the survivor (or she who has not survived) to recover and develop a sense of self, as with Cee in *Home* and Pallas in *Paradise*. In the process, we observe the progressive development of her capacities.

Both thinkers saw a link between expansive democratic participation and racial justice. "If America is to become a government built on the broadest justice to every citizen," Du Bois held, "then every citizen must be enfranchised." He argued that participation in democratic activities, and voting central among them, brought about self- and group knowledge unrealizable under other forms of government. The demos, he believed, should concern itself with the regulation of economic activity; he argued for "the careful, steady increase of public ownership of industry" so that economic activity would not threaten other significant concerns, such as learning and the creation of beauty (Du Bois 1920, 91).

Morrison, like Du Bois, theorized a relationship between an expansive demos and racial justice, as well as the democratic activities essential to her vision of justice. Yet she theorized a distinctive sphere of democracy's enactment *and* concern. Griffin (2021) holds that Morrison came to endorse a notion of transformative

justice through a process of considering and explicitly rejecting other notions of justice, including justice as vengeance in her novel *Song of Solomon*. Griffin also identifies three significant spaces in Morrison's work—outdoors, the ruin and home. Succinctly, truant democratic justice turns the ruined houses of white democracy into (non-racist) homes. Griffin says that in the novel *Home*, “Morrison turns most fully to an exploration between an ethic of care and its potential for achieving a kind of *restorative*, or better still, *transformative* justice” (2021, 85).

Home details Vietnam War veteran Frank's journey to rescue his sister Cee, who has been sterilized by a eugenicist doctor in Atlanta, and take her “home” to Lotus, Georgia. As the story unfolds, we learn that Frank has committed an act of femicidal violence against a young Vietnamese woman. Ironically, Lotus itself has never truly felt like home for the siblings. Neglected by exhausted, overworked parents who are also traumatized by the racial pogrom that drove them to live with their father's father and his cruel wife, the children cast about but cling to each other. Yet when they arrive in the town after Cee's sterilization, Frank is able to give her to a community of women. The women shoo Frank away and begin a long process of healing (not curing) her body and spirit. And it is in witnessing her transformation into a woman who has incorporated her scars into the new person she has become that he is also transformed. Morrison reminds us, Griffin says, that “nothing that can make up for the crimes against [Morrison's] victimized characters.” The best they can hope for is to “learn to live, how to survive, how to be healed, not cured, and how to go out and ‘do some good in the world.’” Critically, in Morrison's model, “the offender is not reconciled with the victim, but the victim is cared for and embraced by the community.” Frank, who is also a victimizer, witnessing this, “must come to terms with the trauma he has caused” and “do something ethically productive, indeed good.” The result is that “a victim and a victimizer are transformed” (2021, 86). Griffin argues that Morrison endorsed a notion of small scale, collectively enacted transformative justice that allowed the survivor (and some, though not all, perpetrators) to be healed (not cured), the space to attain self-knowledge and, ultimately, multiply goodness. The transformation comes about via the communal—that is, the democratic—provision of care. This is a central element of Morrisonian democracy.

Finally, Du Bois and Morrison thought differently about the Black dead and the place of resurrection within the multiracial democracy. Again and again, Du Bois killed his Black Jesus, a stand-in for lynched—and thus spectacularly dead—Black men. But he rarely resurrected him. He explicitly deemphasized the supernatural aspects of Christ's sacrifice to convey that no one was coming to save Blacks: they would have to save themselves. Du Bois thus left it to the living to do the work of resurrection. He came to see the work of resurrection as building a multiracial democracy—and in the US context this required abolition democracy, where all had the educational,

economic, and political resources they needed to live as equal members.

The dead of Morrison's concern, by contrast, are the unspectacularly dead, those who die in the wake of intimate injustice—sexual assault, infanticide, those who are murdered because they are women. They are killed in the ruined houses of white democracy that we, *with their help*, must make into home. Again, Griffin argues that ruined houses and homes are significant spaces within Morrison's understanding of justice, and they are therefore important in Morrisonian democracy. They are the spaces of small scale democratic practices aimed at repair in the wake of intimate injustice. *Home* provides the space for inchoate self-knowledge to come to full flower, the space for healing when there can be no cure, wherein collective storytelling and the collective provision of healing care, through their very enactment, help to build within the healed the capacity to go out and “do some good in the world.” And, importantly, Morrison reminds us via Baby Suggs, holy, that “not a house in the country ain't packed to the rafter with some dead Negro's grief” ([1987] 2004, 60).

Here, then, we see the full temporal and transcendent dimensions of Morrisonian democracy. It is not simply that Morrison's collectively enacted, transformative justice aims to make the world a better place for progeny and future generations, as Griffin correctly notes, and as we see in *Song of Solomon* when the domestic and midwife Circe allows her thieving employers' plantation to fall into ruin by withholding the care she had been compelled to give while redirecting that care to the progeny of their victims' children, Macon and Pilate Dead. It is also the case that collectively enacted, just care makes the world a better place for our dead. It explicitly, and with their input, repairs and enables our relationships with our dead. This is a necessary form of repair, for the dead never have the luxury of a martyr's end in Morrison, and they therefore cannot and do not leave it to the living to do the democratic work that is always left to be done. Morrison holds that “people who die bad don't stay in the ground” ([1997] 2014, 221); remarkably, they stay on and labor alongside the living to create a better, more care-filled world. If Morrison's democracy, like Sethe's 124 in *Beloved*, is “a house peopled by the living activity of the dead” (35), it is so because the ruined racist house of white democracy can only be turned into the transformative, care-filled, nonracist home wherein Morrisonian justice can be found via the inclusion of the voices and work of the dead. Morrison is thereby able to surpass even the impressively expansive boundaries of Du Bois's demos.

Morrison reveled in the supernatural. The dead are her characters' companions, and they themselves have much work to do. Morrison resurrected the dead, and her characters—the women and girls especially—were rarely troubled by it. They commune with and enact responsibilities to the dead. To take but one example, in *Song of Solomon*, the men see death as an end in itself regarding justice, as is true for the members of the vengeful secret society of the Seven Days. Morrison's

character Pilate, by contrast, tends to a murdered man's bones in the name of justice, her "inheritance," and speaks solemnly of her responsibilities to the man her brother has killed to protect her (Morrison 1977, 97). She continues her relationship with her dead father, seeing and speaking to him regularly, heeding his sage advice from beyond his too-shallow grave without question. Her sister-in-law Ruth tends to her father as well, both immediately and long after his death. Yet Morrison presents her fullest account of the role of the dead in democracy in her novel *Paradise*, to which I turn below.

Morrisonian democracy is concerned primarily not with formal rights, not the franchise, nor the economy, but with repairing intimate injustice. There is indeed little voting, though much deliberation. It is, in fact, a space of language creation, for as Morrison, who loved and based a lecture series on *The Words to Say It*, would tell her Nobel Prize audience, the fact that we "do language" may well be "the measure of our lives" (Morrison 1993). Morrisonian democracy addresses intimate injustices via small scale, care-filled, informal practices among ephemeral collectives of wayward, wild, and often altogether invisible women, both living and dead, who come together and disperse. It is enacted, then, by the truant among the fugitive. It rests not so much upon a foundation of land, voting rights, and schools but homes (often ruined white homes, only truantly held), folk healing knowledge, and a willingness to listen to the concerns of the dead. It is also founded on a gloriously profane ethic, the call not only to love one's neighbor—for surely she is suffering, too—but also to love one's flesh, no matter how much it is despised. Its most devoted practitioners are those of illest repute. Morrison calls all who have experienced intimate injustice and the socially marginalized who are at risk of acute intimate injustice into collective action, into storytelling, language creation, deliberation, reflection, and individual and collective judgment, as well as into the collective work of healing bodies and spirits. This process builds their individual and collective agency.

The contrasts between the two thinkers—public/intimate, formal/informal, soldier/folk healer, reputable/wayward, spirit/flesh, living/dead—are not coincidental. Hartman and Weinbaum have drawn attention to Du Bois's failures of analysis regarding Black women in *Black Reconstruction's* "general strike," and therefore in his democratic vision, as well as to the correctives Black feminists like Morrison offered. Hartman writes, "The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women's historical experience as laborers and shaped the character of their resistance to slavery, yet this labor falls outside the heroic account of the black worker and the general strike" (2016, 166). This, she says, has dire consequences for what Du Bois imagined for women within his abolition democracy: "Marriage and protection rather than sexual freedom and reproductive justice were the only ways conceived to redress her wrongs and remedy the 'wound dealt to [her] reputation as a human being.' The sexual violence and reproduction characteristic of enslaved women's

experience fails to produce a radical politics of liberation or a philosophy of freedom" (167).

But where Du Bois failed, Weinbaum argues, Angela Davis, Darlene Clark Hine, and Toni Morrison, among others, took up his unfinished work and provided "a counternarrative" that spoke to "the continued relevance of enslaved women's protest against their reproductive and sexual exploitation" (Weinbaum 2013, 447). These efforts required considerable methodological innovation, for they were forced to confront an intolerably racist and sexist archive in order to prevail over received notions of evidence. Davis wrote from a jail cell with limited access to documentation, and yet she asserted the fact of Black women's resistance, their insurgency, by drawing attention to slaveholders' gendered counterinsurgency practices. Her audience felt what she claimed so deeply that it is now accepted as fact. Morrison, too, helped to completely change our understanding of enslavement, employing "the creative latitude offered by fiction to enter into the battle over historical 'truth' while at the same time sidestepping some of the thorny questions historians have raised about archive and interpretation." Her *Beloved* is not simply a literary masterpiece, it is a potent rejoinder to the analytical failures of *Black Reconstruction*. Weinbaum reads *Beloved* as "an exploration of women's participation in the general strike, against sexual and reproductive bondage and as a meditation on women's withdrawal of sexual and reproductive labor and products from circulation" (453, 458). My exploration of Morrisonian democracy, echoing Syedullah's account of truant Black feminist congregation, extends this line of inquiry by pointing out that in the end, Sethe could not and did not do her work alone. Aware of the femme-sized gap in abolition democracy, Morrison asserted a politics to confront the remainder of slavery's afterlives. And, true to *Beloved's* major theme, it was a politics in which the dead could take part.

DEMOCRACY AND THE DEAD

Juliet Hooker (2023) writes of the capacities Black people have been forced to cultivate—including the capacity for sacrifice—in our racially inegalitarian polity. Part of that inequity includes pervasive violence and premature death, living in what Christina Sharpe (2016) has called "the wake." I would add to Hooker's list the capacity to be in political community with the dead. Rebecca Louise Carter examines the religious work among mothers grieving children at Liberty Street Baptist Church in New Orleans, work that "suggests a kind of *restorative* kinship, one that asserts the value of those who have been lost by restoring their position within the family and community in this world and the next." Carter quotes Ronald K. Barrett, a psychologist whose research on Black mourning practices has demonstrated that in "the traditional black cultural experience, you are born, you die and then you continue to exist in other realms." This is contrasted to the European/Western worldview that sees death as the end of existence. Carter argues that restorative

kinship practices involve a “renegotiation of subjectivity in the space of death” wherein the deceased is “at once a product and agent of history, the site of experience, memory, storytelling and aesthetic judgment, an agent of knowing as much as of action, and the conflicted site for moral acts and gestures amid impossibly immoral societies and institutions” (Carter 2019, 191).

Many historical and contemporary collectives have enacted aspects of Morrison's vision of democracy, including the supernatural publics composed of both the living and the dead that pioneering Black femicide theorist Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective (1979) called into being with her pamphlet “Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?” Smith told a compelling and mobilizing story of serial murder via her “counterdata” practices *and* attempted to care for this transcendent collective. Hers was only one instance of the ephemeral collectives that Terrion Williamson says often come together around the otherwise unremarked deaths of Black women. While not explicitly organized around care for the dead, Tarana Burke's early (and at the time largely unknown) word and world-building work around sexual violence in Selma, Alabama, is another important example (Burke 2021, 224, 236; Combahee River Collective 1979; D'Ignazio 2024, 35; Williamson 2017, 336). Yet Clementine Barfield of the Detroit-based anti-youth violence organization Save Our Sons and Daughters is most instructive here.

Following his death by gun violence, Barfield practiced a Morrisonian democratic form of restorative kinship with her son Derick, and in her efforts we see how the dead can take part in these democracies. Examining a speech Barfield delivered at Penn State, Melynda Price writes: “Part of the work for Ms. Barfield is the constant retelling of her child's life and death. Through her words the listener can see the verdant future that Barfield saw *and could still see* for her son” (Price N.d., 22). In Price's telling of Barfield's tireless resurrective labor, we witness the unending labor and critical imaginative work of remembrance. Barfield's constant dialogue with Derick was informed by her recollection of his life as she continued to piece together a vision of the future—*his* future—for the children of Detroit.

With Derick's ongoing input as well as the input of others, Barfield, community members and Save Our Sons and Daughters worked to transform an urban landscape ravaged by violence, drugs, and the War on Drugs. Derick indeed remains the site of experience, memory, storytelling, and aesthetic judgment. Through his mother's ongoing dialogue with him, he becomes “an agent of history” and certainly “the conflicted site for moral acts and gestures amid impossibly immoral societies and institutions” (Carter 2019, 191). Such practices suggest a distinct episteme but Morrisonian democrats exercise something akin to Arendt's, (1982) “enlarged mentality,” where one trains one's imagination to “go visiting.” “Critical thinking,” as Hannah Arendt says, “goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially

public, open to all sides” (1982, 43). All deliberation involves imagination and interpretation, and Price emphasizes that Barfield's efforts are critical, in that she takes what she knows of Derick, his hopes and dreams and the injustices he faced, into her conversations with him and with others about him.

BLACK FEMICIDE AND MORRISONIAN DEMOCRACY

If *Home* represents Morrison's most developed thinking regarding justice, *Paradise* is her most considered reflection on Black death and democracy—indeed, on Black femicide and democracy. Balfour argues that responsibility is a major theme in Morrison's democratic thought, as “Morrison's essays and fiction advance an account of democratic life that dwells on the efforts of African Americans, individually and collectively, to take responsibility for themselves,” and the book, at its core, concerns Black women's responsibilities to one another, the living and the dead (2021, 542).

Paradise presents the static lives, vibrant, revelatory afterlives, and in-betweens of the people of a deathless Black Eden—Ruby, a town created and ruled by Black men, isolated and thus free from white violence, “Her sweet colored boys unshot, unlynched, unmoled, unimprisoned” (Morrison [1997] 2014, 101). It opens on the deathless men's plot to kill the perhaps already dead female inhabitants of another kind of paradise, a convent 17 miles away. Ruby is named for the sister of the town's founding brothers. She died the right kind of death, and that death is honored in the town's name even as all other death is held at bay. The perhaps-dead women of the convent all would have “died bad” and therefore, under Morrisonian rules, cannot stay in the ground. Aguiar (2004) writes, “As Morrison includes in *Beloved* dead characters cohabiting with the living, the possibility that all or some of the women—Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas—are dead before they reach the convent is a viable one. Each has suffered tragic and potentially fatal circumstances before her arrival. Pallas has been chased and raped; maybe she has drowned. Seneca has been “hired” by a sadistic woman to indulge her sexually violent fantasies; maybe she, too, has been murdered. Gigi participated in a riot that left at least one child dead. And maybe Mavis's husband suffocated her, or she has been murdered by the daughter who dreams apologies to her” (2004, 514).

In twinned spaces—one orderly, patriarchal, oligarchic, utopian, founded by once identical twin brothers, the other disorderly, wholly feminine, borderline anarchic but also sporadically radically democratic, volatile but full of wild beauty and cultivated care—the book considers Black community comfort with the “right” kinds of gender-based violence and the “right” kinds of Black female dead, as well as the deaths left unaccounted for, ungrieved, the dead to whom we are not adequately accountable—and it works to unsettle that comfort. The feminine democratic space is a crumbling convent, a ruin of what was once an ornate embezzler's mansion and then a Catholic school for Arapaho girls,

where they “learned to forget” (Morrison [1997] 2014, 4). The feminine democracy is expressly enacted on the ruin of white settler colonial democracy, complete with its perverse and agnotological Christian veneer. This is indeed the setting for both experiments, in which we have no choice but to build a new, but it is made unavoidably explicit in the women’s case—in the domestic space that Morrison seeks to rehabilitate. The men’s political community is fugitive. They are descendants of families who settled an Oklahoma town after fleeing Louisiana election violence in the 1890s. The women’s democracy, by contrast, is truant, as the living women come to the convent for refuge but always return to the patriarchal community just down the road.

The book reflects on gender-based violence as well as individual and community response to violence against different “kinds” of women. Consider the resolve of Haven’s founding men regarding the specter of violence against women they have “claimed”: “They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman’s kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate. So, they exchanged that danger for the relative safety of brutal work” (99). Contrast this to the lesser founding brother Steward’s reaction to Elder Morgan’s story of violence against a woman “unclaimed”:

In 1919. Taking a walk around New York City before catching his train, he saw two men arguing with a woman. From her clothes, Elder said, he guessed she was a street walking woman, and registering contempt for her trade, he felt at first a connection with the shouting men. Suddenly one of the men smashed the woman in her face with his fist. She fell...Elder hit the whiteman in the jaw and kept hitting until attacked by the second man. Nobody won. All were bruised. The woman was still lying on the pavement when a small crowd began yelling for the police. Frightened, Elder ran and wore his army overcoat all the way back to Oklahoma for fear an officer would see the condition of his uniform...Steward liked that story, but it unnerved him to know it was based on the defense of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the first was his own (94–5).

The convent of *Paradise*, on the other hand, is a haven for all women, including women the men of Ruby have “claimed”: “For more than 20 years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost....women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. Sweetie Fleetwood had walked it, Billie Delia too. And the girl called Seneca. Another called Mavis. Arnette, too, and more than once. And not just these days. They had walked this road from the very first. Soane Morgan, for instance, and once, when she was young, Connie as well. Many of the walkers Lone had seen; others she heard about”

(270). Men never walked the road in quiet desperation, Lone notes. They drove. And though they often headed in the same direction, they never sought the truant communion and salvation that women found there.

Magali Cornier Michael (2002) outlines the democratic practices among the convent’s women. “The women who find their way to the Convent for stays of varying lengths...are included in the community and have a voice in how they will participate in it.” At the convent, the women engage in “difficult dialogic coalition work” and “the process of joining together and shrieking their stories,” while also listening to the stories of the other women. These practices are transformative, endowing each with new subjectivities and new agency that is “coproduced.” By speaking and listening in turn and “through the process of negotiating strategic alliances across their differences to heal themselves from the consequences of the injustice they have been made to suffer, the convent women create a nurturing, dialogic space from which their own refashioned subjectivities emerge, subjectivities that, collectively, cannot only survive a racist and sexist culture but work to resist and redress its injustice” (2002, 655–6, 654, 645, 643).

Pallas’s story best illustrates the character of this Morrisonian democracy. Billie Cato, quite revealingly, rescues a vomiting, mute Pallas from the waiting room of the clinic where she worked and takes her to the Convent, saying, “This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions...Anyway, you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it” (175–6). Pallas would, indeed, get the help she needed:

“Who hurt you, little one?” asked Connie.

Seneca sat down on the floor. She had scant hope that Pallas would say much if anything at all. But Connie was magic. She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying, while Connie said, “Drink a little of this,” and “What pretty earrings,” and “Poor little one, poor, poor little one. They hurt my poor little one.”

It was wine-soaked and took an hour; it was backward and punctuated and incomplete, but it came out—little one’s story of who had hurt her.

After Connie helps her to find her voice, the other women take her to the kitchen, where they eat and celebrate her breakthrough (173–9).

Paradise dramatizes the threat “unclaimed” women represent to patriarchal society, a threat Ruby’s leaders resolve must end in mass femicide. But it also highlights how the “claimed” living women and the “unclaimed” dead need one another, as Aguiar points out: “The Convent women and the women of Ruby fulfill each other’s needs. The Convent women seek the living, and the women seek what they need from the dead. And what each seeks, the other unknowingly possesses:

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas seek life (or its illusions), and Soane, Annette, Sweetie and Billie Delia seek death (or its possibilities). Although the Convent women rarely actively seek out the other women, they do administer to the life affirmations of these women. For the Convent shelters Ruby's women, providing food and care and a 'haven' for their anger and fears" (2004, 515).

What does it mean for dead women to seek life or its illusions? What are death's "possibilities" for living women? Morrison provides a clue regarding the latter when she reveals how much the living women lack in their patriarchal paradise and demonstrates how often the dead women attend to those deficiencies:

From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for 90 miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, thinking of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to start and think of nothing at all. Lampless and without fear she could make her way. And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else. The woman could decide to go back to her own house then, refreshed and ready to sleep... (8–9).

What does Ruby offer its women? Freedom from white violence, and even death itself, in exchange for masculine protection and a freedom that hardly deserves the name. The suggestion here is that the only way to build a livable world, a world in which the women have real freedom, transformative justice, and care—and not the laughably truncated freedom to do feminine labor masculine protection has afforded them—is to sustain and nurture their relationships with the dead women.

In this supposed Black civic paradise, *only* via communion with the Black female dead are the living women given food that they themselves are not expected to prepare, care, emotional support, antidepressants, access to abortions, affirming prenatal and postpartum care for the mothers of children born out of wedlock, child death doula services, rest, safe harbor for nonnormative sexual relationships, as well as the opportunity for egalitarian dialogue, deliberation, talking things through with others in an effort to find one's voice, the space to work collectively toward solutions to problems, the space to sustain one another through decision-making and the space for self-actualizing reflection for the town's living women (102, 113–4, 144, 145). The female dead are the

linchpin of Morrisonian democracy. Morrison seems to insist that communion with (and necessarily within that responsibility and accountability to) the women who "died bad" is the best way forward to workable intimate and civic life for the claimed and ever-living women.

And what does it mean for dead women to seek life or its illusions? The book provides guidance on how the Black female living can honor their responsibilities to the Black female dead—that is, how the Black female living can help the dead who "seek life"—as the Black female dead continue their democratic work. They do so via engagement, relationship, communion. They cannot ignore those who die of Black femicide or white violence; they must face them, be accountable to them, work with them. We, in turn, must keep them present if we are to move forward together. This is a lesson for both Blacks and U.S. democracy.

Finally, if the women are already dead, what was it, really, that the patriarchal men were trying to eradicate? It could only have been this truant communion, this truant democracy. And what is Morrison trying to say to us when, after the femicide that perhaps wasn't, the women's bodies mysteriously and suggestively disappear, leaving only their testimony behind? Did the perhaps-dead women forestall the attempt at eradicating the truant democracy through this testimony? And is it significant to Morrison's democratic theory that it is testimony they do not broadcast, but simply leave—whisper, really—in the basement of this enlarged domestic space? And did they leave, or were they now forever with the ever-living women? Morrison presents a Black male utopia and then slowly unravels it via the feminine dead in favor of her own female-centered, domestic version of democratic justice for the living and the dead alike.

UNSPECTACULAR DEATH AND THE QUIETLY KEPT WORK OF THE TRUANT BLACK FEMINIST "WE"

The large-scale movements Kimberlé Crenshaw desires depend on widely broadcast ethically constitutive storytelling in the service of the construction of an expansive and stable we. But ethically constitutive we's are at great risk of being exclusionary in some way, presumably along familiar lines of normative gender and sexuality. Conversely, adequately gender-inclusive and sexuality-inclusive people-building narratives may never appeal to people in significant numbers to build mass loyalty of the kind enjoyed by the lynching-as-crucifixion story. As well, I am hesitant to advocate an attempt to dethrone the crucifixion story that comes at the price of Black women sharing stories of violation in large groups, a context that has proven indifferent to those stories. These are contexts in which we have not only an entrenched crucifixion story but also master narratives about gender, about Black female sexuality

—for example, the narrative that women and especially Black women lie or cannot be trusted when it comes to sex and sexual assault.

But that does not mean that Black women must abandon democratic storytelling. Morrison suggests how and with whom Black women should share their stories in a racist, patriarchal world, how they may be affirmed, healed, and empowered even as they “sidestep” the masculinist mass movements around them. What, then, is the relationship between Morrisonian democracy, Du Bois’s abolition democracy, and our own? Though this message is clear in her fiction, Morrison’s remarks at the PEN conference (1986), “The Writer and the State,” put a fine point on her skeptical view of mass politics. Morrison titled her remarks “Alienation and the State,” and in them she gave the state what Erica Edwards (2023) calls a “side eye and a side step.” Edwards identifies Morrison’s relationship to the state in this address, following Stephen Best, as a kind of “besideness.” The concept of “besideness,” of paying that which disrespects you no mind, is a useful way to think about Morrison’s democratic practice. Its impact can be profound, especially when considered alongside Camp’s truant “plaiting,” where that which is beside progressively transforms the whole. Morrisonian democracy is designed for participants to steal away, heal in loving, challenging community, and return with new and expanded capacities. It can exist undetected within an abolitionist democracy, as it existed undetected in *Paradise* and as it has within our own.

Crenshaw focuses on what has never been at the expense of nourishing what has been and is. She would change the direction of large-scale masculinist movements like the Movement for Black Lives. But Morrison’s democratic vision reveals the tremendous value of what Black women have long been doing and will continue to do. Morrison provides a map to and a road forward from the kinds of projects that deserve our attention, support, and resources. Like W. E. B. Du Bois before her, Morrison appreciated the link between storytelling, democracy, and justice. But unlike Du Bois, she did not craft stories for mass movements, formal politics, or to build a mass “we,” and her work opens up the possibility that we may not need such movements, hard as they are to come by for Black women. The work of truant Black feminist effervescent and episodic collectives may only require quietly kept stories of the violence and death that targets Black women, told to accompany the informal (and perhaps destined to be overlooked) practices of Black feminine democracy—stories of the small and not the great dead, whispered woman to woman. The aim is not to tell Christlike stories of male martyrdom in hopes of inspiring a movement for peoplehood. Instead, one tells stories of ordinary women’s grief and suffering, of their collective healing, of the ongoing democratic work of their dead. You postfigure collectives who are perpetually coming together, only to come apart and then to come together again. You describe the practices of these collectives. You model the behavior, not of a great man, but of small communities of perfectly

ordinary women, made extraordinary in their coming together with and for the dead. This is Morrison’s good news. For Black femicide activists, I think it is possibly the best news of all.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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