CHAPTER 6

“Body Talk”: *Beloved* and Fragmentation

In our societies, ... it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission ... but the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.1

In Toni Morrison's fiction fragmented bodies are a recurrent trope. In her works bodies, mostly women’s, are often dismembered, cut, wounded, beheaded, disjointed. Characters have physical deformities, disabilities, they bear perennial scars, they are disfigured, mutilated. Some of the bodies are in pieces, in fragments. In *Jazz*, Dorcas' corpse is disfigured with a knife cut by Violet; *Love* too features several examples of characters' physical deformities: Junior has a faint limp; L's swollen feet prevent her from working and getting home as she used to; Heed's arthritis prevents her from carrying out daily tasks; and her body, as well as Celestial’s, bears a scar. *Beloved* comprises even more striking examples of mutilated and disfigured bodies. From Sethe's wounded back, to Beloved’s severed head, this text is a paradigmatic example for exploring the motif of bodily fragmentation and its implications for subjectivity, narrative and ethics. The disjointed body mirrors a fragmentation at the level of subjectivity: “psychic disintegration has taken place, each character splits into a ‘core self’ and ‘alters’”.2 In Morrison’s fiction often the text itself bears the same disjointed appearance: narrative form in *Beloved* powerfully resembles the fragmented bodies and selves of the characters. Whilst much has been made of Morrison's use of bodily fragmentation and its relationship to selfhood, identity, language and narrative,3 in my reading I focus on the use of

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fragmentation and its relation to the ethics of narrative. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s theory of “Body Talk” – which entailed a shift in body studies – I propose an analysis of Beloved’s use of fragmentation as an example of ethical “body talk”.

In his essay “How to Talk About the Body?” (2004) Latour is preoccupied with the ways the body is narrativized, talked about, engaged in accounts; this urges us to reconceptualize the ways in which the body is discussed, represented and dealt with. In formulating a theory on how to “discuss” the body more fluidly to compose a world that can be “at least thinkable”, Latour proposes articulated propositions as opposed to statements; “at best [statements] disappear into tautology”, whilst propositions allow for negotiations. Latour’s theory of “body talk” not only breaks new grounds in body studies, but it also openly engages with other critical approaches: the reference to propositions and statements plainly calls into questions philosophy of language, pragmatics and discourse analysis. As my analysis aims to demonstrate, Morrison’s literary representations of the body proposes new strategies of “body talk” and can provide insights in the ways the body is perceived and signified. What discursive strategies does literature provide to narrativize the body? How does Morrison’s novel engage in “body talk”? What innovative approaches can “body talk” bring about to critical analysis of Beloved? By starting from the premise that narrativizing the body allows to overcome the impossibility to tell the un-speakable of the African American experience, I look at the ways in which Latour’s theory finds a powerful exemplification in Beloved.

Stemming from a phenomenological approach, the following sections engage with the signifying role of the body. I am specifically influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s work in his Phenomenology of Perception in which he theorizes a close-knit relationship between language and body. Departing from dualist ontologies, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the body as a source of meaning: “it is the body which points out, and which speaks.” By engaging with representations of fragmented bodies in Morrison’s Beloved, I investigate the ways in which the novel articulates a “body talk” which allows the body to signify itself, as Merleau-Ponty has it, “to speak”.

My analysis first focuses on the notion and significance of fragmented bodies, to then move on to examples of bodies in pieces in Morrison’s Beloved.

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