

Surviving the Pandemic: Necessary Lessons from Morrison's *Beloved*

Angelyn Mitchell

"Won't You Celebrate with Me"

—Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

From Phillis Wheatley's eighteenth-century historic witness to Jesmyn Ward's twenty first-century southern witness, the gifts of Black women writers are legion. One of their many gifts in their cultural productions is their unapologetic proclamation that Black lives do indeed matter. By centering Black life as vital, Black women writers also offer survival strategies because, as Lucille Clifton writes, "everyday / something has tried to kill [us] / and has failed" (25). Embedded in her poem of origins is a poetic of survival. Clifton's invitation to celebrate her survival may be read as generative as it posits joy as central to survival. This reminder is important, especially at this time; joy may be eschewed in the

grip of survival. Clifton's generous invitation to celebrate situates the Black self as capable of survival, which offers hope, and worthy of celebration, which invokes joy. The agency of both—survival and joy—is a daily choice, Clifton reminds. Reminding her reader that the celebration is as important as the survival, Clifton uses the word “celebrate” three times in this short poem. Clifton's poem, like much of Black women's writing, is just one of many examples of what Toni Morrison calls, in her Nobel lecture, the “life sustaining properties” of language: language that “arcs toward the places where meaning may lie” (20).

In our present moment of life-threatening events, Black women writers and their gifts of “life sustaining properties” seem especially essential. Our classrooms are both sites of threat (because they challenge the status quo) and sites of sustenance. Historically, it is in our classrooms, as well as in our scholarship, that critical discussions of race and its significance in American life occur—we've been doing what is currently popularly termed “anti-racism” work in teaching African American literary and cultural studies. Quite frankly, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately ravaged Black and Brown communities in terms of all quality of life indices, including health, safety, education, employment, housing, and nutrition. Concomitantly, violently racist policing, especially its embrace of extralegal, state sanction executions, continue to terrorize Black and Brown communities. The intersection of these two clear and present dangers—one immediate, fueled by systemic inequities; the other systemic, demanding life-threatening protests—highlights how precarious Black life is in racialized America. The dialectical conversation between these two traumas situates Black life today as existing in both Saidiya Hartman's “afterlife of slavery” and Christina Sharpe's “the wake,” simultaneously.

As “subversive intellectuals,” to use Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's term, those of us who work in African American studies and return to our classrooms this fall might consider how Black women writers might help us navigate these twin crises (101). Their lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope can guide us as these “something[s]” try to kill us” (Clifton, line 14). Unquestionably, there are many lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope in the archive of African American literature, from Harriet Jacobs's “loophole of retreat” (114) to Jesmyn Ward's hurricane. And there is, of course, Toni Morrison, our most celebrated of writers, whose works, especially *Beloved* (1987), offer many sites of generative instruction for times like ours.

To my mind, Morrison's *Beloved* provides a unique opportunity to explore key examples of resilience, perseverance, and hope—all needed to advance possibilities for survival. At first glance, one might think surviving slavery is the lesson of *Beloved*, but Morrison expands our understanding of surviving horrific

experiences emanating from slavery in its aftermath by revealing how trauma is cyclic and generational. Moreover, Morrison posits survival as an agential matter—as not simply a choice, but as the possibility of choice, even in circumscribed circumstances. Two key scenes—Baby Suggs’s sermon in the Clearing and Denver’s choice to “go on out the yard” (244) to save herself and her mother—both occur long after slavery’s end, and both represent the gifts of resilience, perseverance, and hope born of their traumatic experiences in slavery. And both scenes provide important lessons for now.

In the Clearing, Baby Suggs preaches an ethic of self-love, a love that shields against what she considers slavery to be: the “nastiness of life” (23). Her message resonates in our present moment because it reminds us of what is within our control when all seems to be beyond our control. Baby Suggs extolls, “The only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (88). If grace is mercy, if grace is favor, if grace is love, depending upon one’s religious or spiritual orientation, it is undoubtedly what one can bequeath to one’s self, regardless of circumstance, condition, or context. In other words, this gift of love to one’s self is within one’s realm of possibility—even when little else is or seems to be. Moreover, this foundational lesson centers all three gifts—resilience, perseverance, and hope—as essential not only to surviving, but also to thriving. Building upon this foundational lesson, Morrison continues:

‘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. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty [. . .] Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. [. . .] 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; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.’ (88-89)

A full exegesis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper, but I do want to highlight Morrison's intentionality in anatomizing Black bodies in this passage. Doing so allows her to recoup, reconstruct, and reclaim Black bodies in slavery as whole, as loved, as precious. Morrison also reminds her readers of the ultimate prize—self-love—a powerful counter she offers to the oppressive and maligning nature of white supremacy. This reminder is always important as the institutions of white supremacy—what is unnamed but known “out yonder”—seeks to denigrate Black subjectivities in every possible way, as sketched here by Morrison. Morrison's attention to the beauty of the Black body, to the commodification of the Black body, to the spirit within the Black body, to the economy of the Black body, to the tactility of loving the Black body, and to the totality of white supremacy's perversities and cruelties to both the Black body and the Black psyche provides a pedagogy of American slavery and history. It also provides an object lesson of Black resistance, born of resilience, perseverance, and hope, as Baby Suggs explains how each action will counter the traumas of slavery and white supremacy. Significantly, Baby Suggs begins and ends the sermon with affective modes of expression, reifying the power of body and spirit as a bulwark against the assaults of slavery and white supremacy. Resilience, perseverance, and hope are the essence of Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing, where readers may be renewed by her words.

The other scene from *Beloved* that is useful in thinking about the lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope involves Denver, when it seems “past errors taking possession of the present” will destroy her mother (256). Fearful of the dangers within and outside, Denver is also afraid of the unknown if she seeks help. Morrison employs the ancestral voice of Baby Suggs to guide a panicked Denver in what is both a moment of traumatic repetition and of self-preservation. Morrison writes:

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother's last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my.” But you said there was no defense. “There ain't.” Then what do I do? “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (244)

Again, Morrison's attention to Black bodies and trauma through examples from Baby Suggs's life—her broken hip and Sethe's battered feet and back—and focalized through Baby Suggs's voice points to the brutality of white supremacy. But the lesson of resilience, perseverance, and hope is crucial to Denver's recovery.

Denver seeks help after relying on Baby Suggs's examples of resilience and perseverance. Baby Suggs urges Denver to leave her comfort zone where she is entombed in the past to seek the possibilities of the future in spite of her terrifying present. Turning to her community becomes a source of hope for Denver.

The lessons of resilience, perseverance, and hope may be all we can offer, but they are powerful, and they are sustaining. All are necessary pretexts for caring for ourselves and for our students. In this moment, we would do well to remember and to teach what Audre Lorde wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (130). For Black folk, living through the terror of COVID-19 as well as state sanctioned violence and murder will indeed be an act of political warfare. But we do have powerful lessons from Black women writers to guide and to inspire.

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