



THE AMERICAN COSMOPOLITAN
Deracination in the Works
of Jack Kerouac and Toni Morrison

JOHN D. SCHWETMAN
University of Minnesota Duluth

Dean took out other pictures. I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered, stabilized-within-the-photo lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, or actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance [Kerouac: 253-4].

Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her [Morrison, *Beloved*: 262].

Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* and Toni Morrison's 1988 novel *Beloved* both present strong challenges to traditional understandings of community in twentieth-century America. The above two passages capture the harsh juxtaposition that we encounter in each work between the ideal of the traditional grounded community in Dean's photos and Beloved's smile and the riotous rejection of it on "the senseless nightmare road" and the "hill of black people falling." Furthermore, both of these passages utilize a similar iconography for visualizing community by evoking the border zone between family and neighborhood, between private and public spheres of American life where they intersect at the façade of the house facing the street. In Morrison's case, this is most evident in the image of the porch that

Beloved stands on as the crowd of neighbors approaches, and in Kerouac's case we can see this in references to getting "up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life." In both novels, the house represents an ideal of familial stability and a clear place in the larger community, a goal that the characters in these two works fail to achieve. Immediately before the above passage, Sal Paradise, Kerouac's autobiographical protagonist in *On the Road*, refers to his goal in terms that are remarkably conservative in light of the rebellious image of youthfulness that readers typically associate with the Beat Generation. He tells Dean, "All I hope, Dean, is someday we'll be able to live on the same street with our families and get to be a couple of oldtimers together" [Kerouac: 253]. Sal cannot reach this paradise because of his addiction to alcohol, drugs and the road itself, whereas Morrison's protagonist Sethe must overcome the legacy of slavery before she can make an American home. Taken together, these two novels paint a bleak picture of the fruits of Americanization, and provide a clearer understanding of American cosmopolitanism with its rejection of community at the local level.

It is tempting to restrict our understanding of Americanization to the level of the individual immigrant who arrives from a non-American culture and undergoes this process of transformation into an American. And, while the immigrant's experiences in adapting to a new environment make up an important part of the story of Americanization, such a focus reinforces a false sense of completion of the process of Americanization. It suggests that the immigrant or the immigrant's descendants at some point embrace the American identity as completely as they had embraced their earlier one. *On the Road* and *Beloved* indicate to the contrary that the rupture with the community of one's origins that results from immigration is extremely traumatic and that it leaves its traces for many generations to follow. To immigrate is to cut oneself away from one's foundations, and reattaching to new foundations is no easy task, especially in America's cosmopolitan twentieth century when the very notion of foundations (or foundationalism) has fallen into doubt. In this light, Americanization is a process that actively undercuts its own stated objectives. We pay lip service to the value of stable communities, but we also distrust such communities regarding them as dead-end deviations from the open road of limitless opportunities that await those enlightened and cosmopolitan enough to reject local community affiliations. In order to provide this problem of American community with a clearer literary context, this article focuses first on the work that is perhaps the most emblematic of America's embrace of rootlessness—*On the Road*—and second on the novel that portrays rootlessness in its harshest light—*Beloved*. One might define Americanization as a process of planting roots in the new land, but I postulate that Americanization demands the wholesale rejection of rootedness and instead seeks a new template for identity that discards a dependence on geographically determined foundations.

There is, however, an important potential fallacy in any argument about Americanization, especially one emerging from an American perspective as this one does, and that is the fallacy of American exceptionalism. We Americans learn from an early age that we are unique among nationalities. Of course, all nations have qualities exclusive to themselves and thus have a rightful claim to some sort of exceptionalist self

regard, but Americans have a tendency to take this approach too far¹. Puritan fantasies of a New Jerusalem by Plymouth Rock may have established this precedent in the seventeenth century, but the prosperity and global power America attained in the twentieth century have made it even easier for us to be blinded by our own aura of exemplarity. Evident in US foreign policy of the late twentieth century, American exceptionalism can also creep subtly into academic approaches to American culture and, indeed, American literature. My concern is that I will outline a process of alienation from the land and community that has happened in most nations as a result of modernity and mistake it for Americanization. After all, rootlessness is not unique to American culture, and each nation has cultivated its own cosmopolitan *milieu*. For example, some of the most influential French novels of the nineteenth century depict the disenchantment of “young men from the provinces” as they attempt to adjust to new lives in the socially-fractured cosmopolitan environment of Paris. Honoré de Balzac’s Eugène Rastignac and Gustave Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau both feel the anxieties associated with rootlessness, and Charles Baudelaire’s coinage of the term *flâneur* added important nuances to this modernist ideal of artistic detachment from community. So, yes, Americanization as I am defining it will of necessity resemble and even overlap with modernization as experienced in the industrialized world and as perhaps best explained by Karl Marx’s theory of alienation. The key difference, however, is that American alienation takes place within the context of the traumatic discontinuities resulting from immigration. As a consequence, characters detached from community in the European context will have a clearer sense of what they have lost, whereas the American *flâneur*’s sense of detachment will produce a more incoherent form of nostalgia. *On the Road* and *Beloved* both suggest that this incoherence has become so pronounced that it has led Americans to give up even trying to establish ties to traditional communities.

Another trend in this evolution of American community is the rejection of geographical determinism and the appeal of non-geographical modes of defining community, a trend that becomes increasingly evident as we move into an information-based economy. Within this context, Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis seems to slide steadily into obsolescence. The frontier itself is, after all, a symbolic construction that depends on a seamless connection between human communities and the geographical territories that they occupy. Turner describes the frontier as “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization” [Turner: 3]. However, clear lines on maps often elide more complex realities on the ground, as Jack Kerouac’s protagonist Sal Paradise learns at the beginning of his first journey in *On the Road*. At first, Sal travels due north out of New York City in order to join Route 6 and hitchhike west:

I’d been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the roadmap was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada,

¹ Of course, the claim that America is more exceptionalist than other countries is in itself an exceptionalist claim.

and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on Route 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started [Kerouac: 10].

His failure to find a ride on Route 6 makes Sal realize that the geographic harmony of the highway map has failed to correspond with the pragmatic needs of the hitchhiker: "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes" [11]. This initial disenchantment with the great red line sets the stage for many disenchantments that ultimately compel Sal to give up configuring a traditional, geographically determined community around himself [11].

We can identify this distrust of traditional geographical determinism in both *On the Road* and *Beloved*. While Kerouac maintains a fascination with the east-west divide that makes New York home and Denver and San Francisco wild outposts of the American West, Morrison concentrates more on the north-south divide that marks a border between slave states and free states before the Civil War. In both novels, these borders prove to be unreliable, providing mere illusions of stability and false hopes of escape. Placing these two novels next to each other produces a fruitful dialogue between Kerouac's pre-Civil-Rights era and Morrison's post-Civil-Rights era. Kerouac's 1957 novel became the emblem of rebelliousness for the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and persists to this day to appeal to young readers who romanticize the carefree lifestyles depicted in the novel. Kerouac's Beat characters define themselves to a great extent through their attraction to African American cultures of their time, which they can only access indirectly and fleetingly in jazz clubs. Such instances of cultural tourism, boldly progressive in their own time, have taken on an increasingly racist taint as America has moved through the Civil Rights movement into the more nuanced understanding of race, class, gender and cultural difference that frames Morrison's novel *Beloved*². Sal and Dean glamorize the fractious and turbulent African American communities they encounter³, whereas Morrison portrays the tragic causes and consequences of instability within these communities.

Community in *On the Road* exists temporarily and dissipates soon after its emergence. It is ironic that the term "Beat Generation" should evoke such a powerful image in the American psyche of friendship and solidarity

² One more egregious example of this mode of romanticism occurs when Sal and Dean while driving through Virginia regard a poor African American man driving a mule cart and Dean says, "Oh yes, dig him sweet; now there's thoughts in that mind that I would give my last arm to know; to climb in there and find out just what he's poor-ass pondering about this year's turnip greens and ham," [Kerouac: 113]. There are many other examples of cultural insensitivity, albeit naïve and well-intentioned cultural insensitivity, throughout the novel. In spite of Kerouac's clumsiness, we must nonetheless regard his adventures in racial exoticism as an important early step in the popularization of African American culture that paved the way for advances in the Civil Rights era.

³ Holton's article, "Kerouac among the Fellahin: *On the Road* to the Postmodern," provides an engaging overview of Kerouac's romanticization of African American culture. Holton writes of Sal Paradise's desire to "exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" [Kerouac: 180] as a culturally significant form of longing with dubious undertones: "This longing—a sort of fantasized racial version of cross-dressing—tells us little, however, about that other world. A distant and indirect descendant of minstrel show blackface perhaps, a peculiar inversion of the earlier African-American concern with 'passing,' this desire comes up often in one form or another during the period" [Holton: 269].

when its most famous and emblematic novel so eloquently depicts the repeated failure of community and the friendships that bind it together. The characters in this novel constantly squabble, neglect each other, and even betray each other. Throughout the novel, the protagonist Sal stands in the shadow of the central character Dean, who is the most sociopathic and unreliable of any of them. Brendon Nicholls offers a psychoanalytic explanation of Kerouac's detachment from community. Considering Kerouac's overall *corpus* of literary work, Nicholls identifies such factors as repressed homosexuality and fetishism, resulting from the fact that he "has never really found his way out of the Oedipal triangle and has not fully identified with a parent of either sex" [Nicholls: 528]. Nicholls provides a very insightful explanation of Kerouac's writing that admirably parses some of the more obscure pronouncements in his later works. However, Nicholls' focus on Kerouac's psychology keeps him from addressing another question: how does this troubled fetishist, Jack Kerouac, become the spokesperson for a generation of Americans? Clearly, Kerouac's experiences with failed community correspond with the experiences of many readers growing up in the midst of America's transition from modernity to postmodernity and the alienation from land and labor accompanying this transition. Kerouac's portrait of rootlessness and romanticization of rootedness, which he displaces onto other cultures, provides something many readers can relate to and make *On the Road* an aspirational model of cosmopolitanism.

On the Road follows a basic pattern of travel narrative, in which the protagonist arrives in a new location, embraces the novelty of the place, gets to know some of the locals, then falls into a stage of "collapsing," as Kerouac calls it toward the end of his first visit to Denver [Kerouac: 56], motivating his flight to yet another community where he begins the cycle all over again. This pattern parallels the narrative of the emergence and downfall of civilization that Kerouac read about in Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which was also where Kerouac acquired the term *fellahin*. He applies this term to members of various non-Western cultures—the people who will move in and occupy the colossal ruins of our own fallen civilization⁴. One example of the rise and fall of Sal's little empire occurs when Sal embarks on his initial journey to Denver and eagerly anticipates his triumphant march into town, rejoining his old Columbia University friends who have returned home to visit their families: "I pictured myself in a Denver bar that night, with all the gang, and in their eyes I would be strange and ragged and like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only Word I had was 'Wow!'" [Kerouac: 35]. In summoning forth his expectations, this prophet refers to the group of friends awaiting him as a *gang*, a term that recurs throughout the novel to describe the loose assemblage of alienated intellectuals Sal associates with. *Gang* is a powerful word in American culture, etymologically linked the idea of travel with its Germanic roots in the verb *to go*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *gang* the verb changed into a noun, designating the path that one took when going somewhere, and then into a noun, designating the things and people grouped together to go somewhere. In twentieth-century American culture,

⁴ Again, see Robert Holton's article for a close consideration of Spengler's influence on Kerouac and his views of non-Western cultures.

the term had the childish, light-hearted connotation of the famous *Our Gang* series of short films—later to become *The Little Rascals*—about the antics of rowdy, working-class kids. The term also had its more violent and disturbing connotations in its application to organized crime syndicates. Though roughly synonymous with *community*, the term *gang* indicates something less formal and more threatening to the established social order. Particularly in accounts of 1990s youth gangs associated with the crack epidemic, *gang* came to represent a corrosive problem in American society needing a solution. Unfortunately, in American public policy and in the popular media, claims about the evils of youth gangs often precede or even displace serious consideration of what a gang is⁵. Such ambiguity about gangs is symptomatic of a more general anxiety about community formation in American culture and is perhaps more pronounced in the United States than in less transient cultures with longer community histories.

At any rate, the reality that Sal encounters upon reaching Denver is less pleasant than the romanticized barroom gang ideal he envisions. Instead of a unified band of friends, he finds a group riven by class-based hostilities: “I sensed some kind of conspiracy lined up two groups in the gang: it was Chad King and Tim Gray and Roland Major, together with the Rawlinses, generally agreeing to ignore Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx. I was smack in the middle of this interesting war” [Kerouac: 37]. Sal then explains that the dividing line between these two sides is one of class. Whereas Dean, who “was the son of wino” [37], comes from a marginal, homeless background of extreme hardship, Chad King and others come from stable, placid, suburban homes. These somewhat conservative Columbia University students initially find themselves drawn to Dean’s criminality because it feeds their rebellious stance against the bland, bourgeois culture of their own origins. It is the same spirit of rebellion that draws them to African American culture in jazz clubs. However, they cannot ultimately overcome their “white ambitions,” and Sal cannot either, as he finds out on a later visit to Denver [180]. Once the novelty wears off, Dean’s wild ways become an inconvenience. Sal finds himself between these two camps because his own background is socio-economically between the dire poverty of Dean’s background and the middle-class comfort of Chad King’s background. Sal consequently tolerates Dean longer than most of his Denver friends can, but his indulgence of Dean’s socio-pathologies comes at the cost of his own connection to a rooted community.

Dean’s early homelessness and the imagery of house and home that runs through the novel provide a basis for our understanding of Dean’s

⁵ The US Supreme Court took a significant stand on the issue in June of 1999, when it ruled that a Chicago anti-gang ordinance violated the US Constitution when it criminalized otherwise legal activities on the part of actual or suspected gang members. In response to the question “What is a gang?” the US Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s fact sheet in *Supreme Court Debates* states “There is no accepted standard definition. State and local jurisdictions tend to develop their own. The following criteria have been widely used in research: 1) formal organization structure (not a syndicate), 2) identifiable leadership, 3) identified with a territory, 4) recurrent interaction, and 5) engaging in serious or violent behavior. These criteria are increasingly used to distinguish gangs from other law-violating youth groups and other collective youth groups. Unlike adult crime, most juvenile delinquency is committed in groups” [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: 37].

detachment from community and his nomadic tendencies as represented by the road. Indeed, in Sal's descriptions of him, it is rare that we see Dean in this novel outside of the proximity of the automobiles that define him: "Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he was actually born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on the way to Los Angeles" [1]. When in New York, Dean works as a parking attendant, and when exchanging intellectual views with Carlo Marx (a. k. a. Allen Ginsberg) "he keeps rushing out to see the midget auto races" [42]. Dean's constitutional inability to occupy a home influences Sal's own view of his place in the world, even though Sal himself is a terrible driver. He wants to have a happy home down the street from Dean's so that they can, as I stated at the outset of this paper, "get to be a couple of oldtimers together" [253], but he cannot. During his first trip to Denver, Sal and his friends parody the act of making a home when they fashion a small shack in Central City, Colorado as a temporary dwelling to house them for one night during an opera festival—"an old miner's house at the edge of town where we boys could sleep for the weekend; all we had to do was clean it out. We could also throw vast parties there. It was an old shack of a thing covered with an inch of dust inside; it had a porch and well in back" [52]. As one of the few abodes in the novel to receive any attention at all, it is remarkably insubstantial. Its history takes on the arbitrary, immaterial feel of much of the rest of the old Colorado "ghost town" that fills up with tourists once a year to celebrate opera in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. After a long night of drinking, the young Bohemians wake up to find themselves in a state of emotional disarray finding symbolic reinforcement in the actual disarray of their poorly renovated shelter: "I woke up and turned over; a big cloud of dust rose from the mattress. I yanked at the window; it was nailed. Tim Gray was in the bed, too. We coughed and sneezed. Our breakfast consisted of stale beer" [55]. The content and declarative simplicity of these sentences conveys a lack of solidarity between the friends. Each sentence exists grammatically in a neutral state with respect to the one preceding and the one following, and the reality they reflect appears fractured and serial. Yet, this is the image of community that thousands of young readers of the novel have celebrated when reading this book.

The historically iconic power of houses plays a similar role in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, which tells the story of a woman named Sethe who escapes slavery in 1855 with four children. She then murders one of them when slave holders come into her Ohio refuge, the home of her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, to return Sethe and her children to slavery. By crossing the Ohio River, Sethe has crossed that important boundary between slave and free states. When the slaveholders cross that same boundary in pursuit and then violate of the sanctuary of Baby Suggs' home, the Fugitive Slave Laws of the time legitimate their actions. In the aftermath of this murder, Sethe spends time in jail then returns to a very lonely existence in Baby Suggs' house with her three surviving children and the ghost of the daughter whom she has killed. Baby Suggs dies a lingering death consumed by grief. In 1873 and 1874, the years of the primary action of the novel, the long, difficult exorcism of the ghost takes place through the arrival of Paul D and eventually the physical incarnation of the ghost herself, *Beloved*. She is a teenage girl who moves in with Sethe and her remaining child Denver (two sons have departed, driven away by the ghost), and Sethe believes her to be

the returning spirit of the child she has killed. Other than numerous flashbacks to Sethe's life in slavery with Paul D on a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home, most of these events take place in Baby Suggs' house, which Morrison refers to simply as 124, its address⁶. For Morrison, the most important features of 124 are its mystical qualities, though she also provides some physical details. 124's physical status as a house becomes more important when we compare it to a related Ohio-valley dwelling on the Southern side of the Ohio River in Kentucky: Uncle Tom's Cabin. In the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an important precursor to *Beloved*, Harriet Beecher Stowe makes use of the standard nineteenth-century convention of extensive description of a house in order to reveal the moral qualities of the house's occupants. As the title of the novel suggests, Uncle Tom's cabin is at the moral center of the novel, and its physical description clearly conveys this virtue in terms that any nineteenth-century housewife would instantly recognize:

In front it had a neat garden-patch, where, every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and a variety of fruits and vegetable, flourished under careful tending . . . Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four o'clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors, and were the delight and pride of Aunt Chloe's heart [Beecher Stowe: 29].

The passage places the reader outside of the cabin in the public space before it, then leads the reader through the interstitial zone between public and private spheres and into the hospitality of Aunt Chloe, whose "careful tending" drives the entire moral universe of Stowe's anti-slavery novel⁷. As Jane Tompkins explains in her eloquent analysis of nineteenth-century American novel, *Sentimental Designs*, "[. . .] Stowe relocates the center of power in American life, placing it not in the government, nor in the courts of law, nor in the factories, nor in the marketplace, but in the kitchen. And that means that the new society will not be controlled by men, but by women" [Tompkins: 145]. This connection of the house to the political order of nineteenth-century America works because, in Stowe's case, the house's face serves as a visual icon of community stability and clear modes of integration between the individuals within it.

⁶ In her article, "To Be Loved: Amy Denver and Human Need—Bridges to Understanding in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Coonradt points out that 124 is "the number that sequentially indicates the *absence* of the number '3' signifying that murdered and missing, third-born child" [170]. And, in a more deconstructionist vein, Handley writes in "The House a Ghost Built: *Nommo*, Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" that "double misrecognition or misreading between Sethe and Beloved occurs in a structure—Sethe's home—that houses the allegory of our own reading: '124' addresses this double specularity, or this doubling relationship, in that the numbers each double the one preceding [685]. Handley's article is noteworthy in its artful weaving of multiculturalist and deconstructionist perspectives on *Beloved* and serves as very useful means of grasping the genre magical realism and its consequences in this text.

⁷ It is useful to contrast this friendly façade with its more corrupt and unwholesome opposite on the Legree Plantation, where Tom dies his ignoble death at the hands of the slave system's most brutal participant: "Here and there, a mildewed jessamine or honeysuckle hung raggedly from some ornamental support, which had been pushed to one side by being used as a horse-hitching post. What once was a large garden was now all grown over with weeds, through which here and there, some solitary exotic reared its forsaken head." (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 491). Evil is evident in the woman's domestic harmony crassly shoved aside to hitch the man's horses.

Morrison's disputes the community ideal underlying Stowe's anti-slavery novel and thus muddles the iconography of domestic tranquility assured by the housewife. She refrains from presenting readers with an objective description of 124 and instead allows its form to shift according to the predispositions of the character regarding it. In the opening sentences of the novel, we find out that "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it, and so did the children" [Morrison, *Beloved*: 3]. The reassuring, objective narrative voice of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in that position of authority that allows it to distinguish between the "well-tended" front-yard garden and the morally decrepit one, is no longer present. In order to undercut the absolutist racial hierarchies of slavery, Morrison uses magical realism to undercut absolutism in general. William R. Handley makes a persuasive case for Morrison's appropriation of a West African tradition of naming called *nommo*, "the magic power of the word to call things into being, to give life to things through the unity of word, water, seed, and blood" [Handley: 677]. If the word calls things into being, then it does not retain that separation from an absolute reality that the Western tradition ascribes to it. Instead of providing an index by which to identify an object in the world, the *nommo* tradition implies that words create that object and shape it. By analogy, there is no 124 independent of the unsettled moods of whoever happens to be regarding it. Thus, the baby's venom of the opening sentences of the novel is difficult to place within a rigid, Western, epistemological framework⁸. In literal and symbolic senses, this gesture is anti-foundationalist.

The same concerns apply to later depictions of 124 from the point of view of people approaching it from outside as readers necessarily do at the novel's outset. When concerned women from the neighborhood arrive before 124 to save Sethe from *Beloved* at the end of the novel, Morrison tells us, "the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves" [Morrison, *Beloved*: 304]. The façade of 124 takes them immediately back to the party at 124 on the day before Sethe murdered *Beloved* 18 years earlier. At this point in the story, the iconography of 124's façade merges with the community that it metaphorically maps out for readers. After all, Sethe's murder turns out to be something more than the act of a single desperate individual. It is the work of the entire African American community of Cincinnati that has stood by silently as the slave holders arrived to return their neighbor and her children to slavery. One month after Sethe's arrival at 124, Baby Suggs decides to have a party to celebrate the family's good fortune, and ninety neighbors attend, "ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry" [Morrison, *Beloved*: 161]. As their anger, resulting from envy, festers over the course of the following day, the slave-holders arrive to capture Sethe, and, as one friend of Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, recalls, their lingering resentment explains "why nobody ran on ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son to

⁸ Hayes offers us another means of interpreting 124's significance as a challenge to the conventional Western iconography of the house in her article, "The Named and the Nameless: 124 and 'The Other Place' As Semiotic *Chorae*". In this article, she applies Julia Kristeva's term *chora*, "a non-verbal, nonrationalist, maternal magic circle," to 124, identifying it as a sort of womb of one's own. She also points out that "[s]ignificantly, it is the *women* of the community who finally break through the noose surrounding 124 and free the house of *Beloved*" in the climactic scene of *Beloved*'s exorcism with which I began this article [677].

cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions"[184]. Sethe's crime represents the failure of the community in which she lives, a community that has allowed envy to cloud its judgment then turned the victim of that envy into a pariah for the nineteen years, intervening between Sethe's violent act and Beloved's exorcism. The stakes are much higher for this community than they are for that of Sal Paradise because of the pressing weight of slavery and its aftermath in the lives of these characters, and Morrison clearly means to apply this historical situation to the African American communities of her own time as well⁹.

Taken together, *On the Road* and *Beloved* engage in an uneasy dialogue with each other. Both writers criticize and even estrange themselves from traditional, mainstream American communities, and both seek alternatives to them. Sal Paradise's nomadic gang fails to cohere for long enough to provide him with a home, and Sethe's embrace of the incarnated ghost of her murdered child only prolongs her mourning without attaching her to any particular group. Both characters live in a state of exile, on the front porch but not inside the warm house or outside on the sidewalks of life among their neighbors, and this exile takes its toll on them as they seek to identify themselves. The resolution to this unsustainable existence remains inaccessible to Sal, who concludes his story by rejecting the flesh-and-blood Dean and simultaneously embracing what Dean represents on a more mystical level: "nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty" [Kerouac: 307]. This curious and famous final statement in the novel leaves Sal perpetually disconnected and unresolved, and thus makes him a hero to restless young Americans. At the end of *Beloved*, the riot of neighbors drives Beloved away and allows Sethe to find a home with Paul D, a nomadic exile analogous to Sal Paradise in some ways. Morrison allows Sethe the possibility of reintegration into a community, but sacrifices Beloved in the process, consigning her to a fate that "was a story not to pass on" [Morrison, *Beloved*: 324]. Beloved must disappear into a ghostly exile so that her mother can continue on. Beloved's lingering, albeit undefined, memory guarantees that Sethe and the American tradition she represents will never completely root themselves to the American soil in the way that they imagine their ancestors had been rooted on some other continent sometime in the past. Sethe like Sal Paradise is thus an American cosmopolitan.

⁹ Morrison's earlier novel *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973) depicts similar breakdowns in a more recent African American community in Ohio that likewise judges one of its female members harshly. In this 1973 novel, Morrison likewise equivocates about the nature of this group of people, writing, "Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't separate places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by" [*Sula*, 166].

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