

“Toward a Political Economy of Death OR The Threat/Fear of Death as the Fundamental Mode of Coercion”

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Abstract

*This paper begins exploring the political economy that accrues around the exchanges that take place at the interchange of life and death. It argues that our disavowed fear of death allows those who deploy the politicized version of death to exploit our material and symbolic production of value. The paper examines modes of disavowal of death from Marxian, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological viewpoints, explores a crucial distinction between “natural” and “political” death, assesses the role of death in the Marxian notions of “Primitive Accumulation” and “Reproduction of the Relations of Production,” and finally ends by briefly analyzing the tensions between the reproduction of life and death in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.*

I want to begin this paper with an apology – it is going to be a rather morbid paper. I want to talk today about death – a subject that few people want to discuss and even fewer find important or exciting. My current book project will eventually argue that the threat of death is the most fundamental mode of coercion and that it permeates our lives in ways that we do not want to acknowledge. We live in a profound **disavowal** of the threat of death: we recognize it superficially so that we can deny it more profoundly on the deeper registers that constitute our ontological and political being. And so it is perhaps appropriate to begin with an analysis of the source of this disavowal and its consequences. But before examining this disavowal, let me contextualize this paper within my ongoing work on what I would like to call the “Political Economy of Death.”

My last book, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*, argued that all of Wright's fiction and autobiographies are dedicated, subtextually if not explicitly, to an excavation of ways in which the Jim Crow society in the US forced individual black subjects to form themselves around the threat and fear of death. Wright says in his autobiography that by the time he was an 11-year old boy growing up in Mississippi, he felt like he had been the victim of a thousand lynchings. But Wright is not only a passive victim of the threat of death; he is also an agent who effectively begins his autobiography with an account of how he, at about the age of 5, lynched a kitten in order to undermine his father's moral authority. And that experience of death, I argue, permeates Wright's psyche and determines the deep structures and the content of every piece of fiction and autobiography that he wrote. In the process, he ends up providing a series of deep excavations of how the death-bound-subject is formed; his work in effect constitutes an erotic monument to the work of death.

Building on the DBS, my current research project examines 4 African American feminist neo-slave narratives that are all preoccupied with examining what happens when the threat of death invades the site of birth. Theoretically this project focuses on effects of death's role in the Marxian notion of the "reproduction of the relations of production" – and reproduction is to be understood here simultaneously as the Marxian macro-economic formulation and as biological and cultural reproduction. The novels I have chosen address both registers of

reproduction and explore the maternal resistance to the attempt by death to permeate the new born life.

My research is focused on the political phenomenology of the subjectivity that is formed around the threat/fear of death. The following kinds of investigations provide the background and the horizons of my analysis: Socio-historical accounts or analyses of slavery, particularly the work of Orlando Patterson, the phenomenology of death (from Heidegger & Hegel to Derrida, Levinas, and Badiou), a marxian political economy that can be articulated around the “exchange” of death and life, the psychoanalytic mapping of the relations between Eros and Thanatos, i.e. the life drives and the death drives, and, last but not least, the kind of work being done here in South Africa (in literary texts as *Swize Bansi is Dead*, in Steve Biko’s powerful meditation on death, in Achille Mbembe’s classic essay on “Necropolitics,” and in Mabogo Moor’s work on the relations between Fredric Douglass and Steve Biko). I use all of the above; but I have focused primarily on African American narratives that explore the terrain of what I call “political death.”

My work is preoccupied with what Fanon would call “the **lived experience** of slavery.” One can say that the discourses that provide the backgrounds and horizons of my work constitute something like a springboard, which allows me to dive into the swimming pool that is the “lived experience of slavery and death.” And I am convinced that African American literature – from the earliest slave narratives to contemporary neo-slave novels – constitutes one of the most powerful

articulations of such an experience. And the examination of this articulation entails an ancillary issue of how best one can **read** or **excavate** this diegetic discourses.

I would like to briefly define three crucial concepts before examining the disavowal of death. **First**, I would like to emphasize that the threat of death is negatively isomorphic with the fear of death. Threat and fear of death constitute two sides of a coin – without either side the coin has no political tender: the threat of death in the absence of fear of death is meaningless and insignificant – this is clearly emphasized by Steve Biko’s brilliant essay on death. However, given the abject fear of death in most human hearts, the threat is, in my view, the most powerful mode of coercion. Just as the threat and the fear of death form a symbiotic unit, so do the adamant desire to live and the equally adamant reluctance to die. These symbioses need to be deconstructed, and the genealogies and taxonomies of modes of coercion and resistance need further exploration.

Second. The terms, Eros and Thanatos, are rather chameleonic. My usage is based on Jean Laplanche’s definition: for him, Eros is work of binding: “Eros is the gatherer and tends to form perpetually richer and more complex unities, initially on the biological level, then on the psychological and social one. Finally . . . Eros tends to maintain and to raise the energy level of the configurations whose intimate bonds it forms” (108). “Eros is what seeks to maintain, preserve, and even augment the cohesion and the synthetic tendency of living beings and of psychic life” (123). And by “synthetic” he means, “synthesizing” (and not artificial). Thanatos, is then of

course, the work of “unbinding,” and obviously, from a secular viewpoint, death is the final and total work of unbinding.

Third. My analyses of these terrains rely on a distinction that I have made elsewhere between diegetic and exegetic theory. (Exegetic theory being articulated via analytics modes; and diegetic theory being articulated via narrative modes). What we call Euro-American/Western “theory” today, what was in the recent past called philosophy, operates predominantly on the exegetic register (Phenomenology is a significant exception); by contrast, as my late colleague Barbara Christian has argued, a great deal of the fundamental, foundational African American meditation about the experiences of slavery and racial, as well as sexual and cultural, oppression takes place via various literary and cultural narratives. Following her lead, I would argue that these texts constitute a kind of diegetic theory. Literary and cultural texts encode as much theoretical knowledge as do exegetic texts; but perhaps we have to learn to read the former differently than the latter, or perhaps we need to better mediate the two forms of theory.

Disavowal of Death. (Disavowal = recognition and denial)

In examining the disavowal of death I will jump from one end of the spectrum, i.e., the micro-structural constitution of disavowal embodied in the somatic structures of subjectivity, to the other end, i.e., the macro-structural deployment of that disavowal expressed most systematically in religious deployment. Both forms of disavowal constitute, in my view, one of the cornerstones of the dialectics of

death. One of the central texts here is, of course, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and his emphasis on the distinction between what he calls "inauthentic" and "authentic" attitudes to death. While the terminology of "authenticity" is strictly prohibited by poststructuralist doxa, Heidegger's distinction becomes more useful if interpret the "inauthentic" as our tendency to deny the efficacy of death and the "authentic" as the deliberately conscious acknowledgement that we are in fact structured as "being-toward-death" and that hence our lives are totally permeated by death. Denial of death imprisons us, according to Heidegger, while the recognition of death can set us free. The tension between the former and the latter stems from the fact that death is for Dasein an "impossible possibility." In his magisterial book, *Aporia*, Derrida further elucidates the nature of this "impossible possibility." (I will not enter here the phenomenological arcana about the structures of possibility –ImP of Poss or Poss of ImP).

Micro-structural Disavowal of Death.

Now I think something very interesting happens when we overlay this phenomenological tension between acknowledgement and denial with the psychoanalytic distinction between the Conscious and the Unconscious structures of the mind, and particularly when we introduce into the mix the psychoanalytic claim that the Unconscious has no knowledge of death. This notion is challenged by many post-Freudian analysts (UNCNS does not know death because it IS death!!!). Nevertheless, the overlap between the phenomenological and the psychoanalytic

claims raises some interesting questions: why does the unconscious not recognize death, or what are the grounds of the denial? I would argue that the acknowledgement of death resides unproblematically, if very superficially in the cognitive, conscious mind, while denial is adamantly entrenched in somatic, unconscious knowledge. The body is the predominant ground of the unconscious and it operates with its own noetic structures over which the conscious mind very often has little or no control whatsoever. Let us take a very trivial and mundane example of one unconscious noetic structure that determines life and death: everyone in this room is breathing (at least I hope so), but I suspect that no one is doing so very consciously or deliberately. While breathing is situated at the junction of the Unconscious and the Conscious mind, it is predominantly controlled by an Unconscious noetic apparatus, which also significantly determines the subject's unique somatic and symbolic identity. **(Bigger Thomas – breathing = political significance + Fanon's tense muscles)**. For example, we know from modern medical practices of organ transplantation that each body has knowledge of its own unique identity and when you try to transplant a foreign organ the body will reject it because it does not belong. Each body has non-epistemic knowledge of its own unique identity, but far more important from our viewpoint is the fact that in spite of each body's uniqueness, all bodies are inscribed with a prime directive: to stay alive as long as possible and to avoid death at all costs. **(E.g. bleeding & shutting down of non-vital functions in danger and in order to stay alive as long as**

possible). Our somatic structures, however, are also inscribed with an even deeper biological temporal structure that drives the body toward death – we are all programmed to die sooner or later. Thus the body itself constitutes a profound struggle between Eros and Thanatos.

So, what I am suggesting here is that the somatic resistance to death, itself unconscious, superimposes itself over the even deeper unconscious somatic structure that is indeed a “being-toward-death.” So, the denial of death that Heidegger critiques is grounded not in some “inauthentic” ontic attitude but in the somatic imperative to do everything possible to avoid death, to stay alive no matter how terrible the privation and how relentless the oppression. And I would like to propose that the somatic imperative to deny death translates itself on the cognitive and psychic/affective registers into an abject fear of death. The vast majority of human beings live in abject fear of death. It is only rare individuals like Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Steve Biko, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, who are deliberately able to choose death, when forced to do so, instead of choosing oppressive survival. And I think it is this imperative to deny death as well as our fear of death that permit us to tolerate the most horrendous forms of oppression and exploitation just so we can keep on living; most people, including slaves and wage-slaves, will adamantly continue to live on in spite of abject misery and severe deprivation. Life’s unconscious imperative to live on no matter what, informs the structure of Eros as the capacity to bind to all things, including to the capacity to

unbind. As Laplace has argued, the death drive is an extension of the life drive. We all become addicted to complex processes of unbinding. As Jacques Lacan has demonstrated, we are all formed at some level of our being by the structure of *Jouissance*, that is, of the pleasure that in some form or another is killing us.

(Heidegger's work = coming to consciousness about death = overcoming disavowal of death).

Macro-structural Disavowal of Death: Religions

The disavowal of death, based on psychosomatic imperative to avoid death, is nowhere better evident than in the fundamental structures that constitute the vast majority of religions and quasi-religious collective cultural formations. Like individual subjects, religions are fully aware of the fact that we all die. But unlike individuals, these religions invest massively in developing very complex ideologies (or "theologies") designed to persuade you that if you are willing to live according to certain strictures, beliefs, and practices, then you will live forever beyond death. Or, to put it another way, religions tend to define death as a short, temporary hiatus between modes of life that are essentially continuous. Now non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, etc., may be exceptions to this pattern to some degree. But even a cursory examination of several religious practices can be quite revealing.

A) A glance at the Egyptian civilization quickly reveals that its most impressive monuments, the pyramids, are in fact elaborate tombs designed to assure the continuity of the lives of kings & queens buried in these tombs. Artifacts buried with these kings and queens are often chosen for the utilitarian values they hold for the rebirth of these royal-cum-divine dignitaries. If one looks at the pyramids as tombs designed to deny or overcome death, then it seems to me that we have to marvel at the enormous amount of labor required to build these tombs. And the labor is of course not just physical; it also includes vast quantities of intellectual, affective, aesthetic, and ideological labor. This transaction, considered from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, readily exposes the fact that an enormous amount of Erotic energy (including labor) was expended by this culture in order to deny the finality of death. One can say perhaps that this transaction, this expenditure of Erotic energy, is designed to kill death forever.

B) But death's ability to infiltrate and control life from the inside, so to speak, its ability to determine the quantity, quality, and direction of Erotic energy, is most clearly evident in monotheistic religions. All the three great monotheistic religions are structured around the attempt to guarantee the continuity of "life" after death, a death that is rearticulated as non-death or a pseudo-death. **(See poetry of John Donne)** And these religions guarantee the continuity of life on the condition that one behaves in life according to the religious precepts of what constitutes a "good" life, that is, a life that is subservient to the prevailing religious ideology or theology.

The true believer is in fact being asked to relinquish control of his/her life, including his erotic energies, in exchange for the abolition of death or the radical denial of death. Monotheism as a discursive formation thus constitutes a complex political economy centered on the use value and exchange value of life and death. And as with the ancient Egyptian civilization, these religions are able to appropriate, rearticulate, and redirect the vast quantity of erotic energies in exchange for the denial of death. The wondrous beauty of cathedrals, mosques, and temples, the complex theological edifices and doctrines, the prolonged management of vast populations, and indeed the construction of entire civilizations – all these index the erotic energies that can be accumulated and channeled in exchange for the denial of death. But we must not forget that equally powerful quota of Thanatos that is also channeled by this exchange mechanism: the believer is licensed, in deed often required, to justifiably kill the countless enemies of his God. And these killings are then articulated as part of the erotic struggle necessary to protect the standing of one's God, a God who in turn protects one from death.

Both Eros and Thanatos are thus powerfully articulated and directed by this political economy, which reaches into the innermost structure of human subjectivity. The Catholic practice of "confession" is a clear index of this form of surveillance and subjection, one that puts the panopticon to shame. The omnipresence and omniscience of the monotheistic God guarantees a total control of all human erotic energies. And we must remember that all these religions also

demand a tithe, hence a spiritual as well as a material fee for the denial of death. In short, these religions constitute very elaborate cultural mechanisms for managing one's fear of death. They develop symbolic and material political economies as sophisticated and powerful as those developed by Capitalism.

To a great extent these are religions of the past: not many great mosques, cathedrals, or temples are being built any more (stadiums instead); but a great many people are still being slaughtered in the name of one God or another. Which brings us to a brief consideration of our contemporary religion, namely Capitalism. We do not have the time to trace the genealogical relations between religion and the rise of capitalism, to interrogate the work of people like Max Weber and R.H. Tawney. But I would contend that Capitalism is a religion, that we are all controlled by its ideo-theology, its (natural) "laws" about supply and demand, the laws of the market place, etc., etc. These control us as much as divine laws control the faithful followers of monotheistic or pantheistic religions. While we cannot explore the continuity between these religions and capitalism in substantive terms, we can point to the iconic markers that acknowledge the enduring bonds. Consider briefly the current flag of Capitalist dominance: the almighty dollar, which Marx would call the universal medium of exchange and for the accumulation of value. Both the omniscient eye of monotheism and the pyramid as a tomb, both guarantors of the denial of death, are incorporated into the dollar. And the cut at the top of the pyramid also hints at the fact that the gap that divides the 1% at the top of the

pyramid from the 99% below is about the same now as it was in ancient Egypt. In contrast to the religions of the past, Capitalism has devised an exchange mechanism that is far more efficient at transferring and accumulating value. Within Capitalism it is the accumulation of value as such that guarantees, at a deep unconscious level, the overcoming of death. Capitalist society's desire to overcome death is indexed by the investment of value, that is, the expenditure of funds, for the prolongation of life. According to various surveys, approximately 30% of Medicare (explain Medicare) funds are spent on trying to keep people alive in the last year of their lives. According to one particular survey, Medicare spends more money in the last two months of patients' lives than it does on the entire annual budget of the US Department of Education. And then we also have characters like Walt Disney who have themselves frozen so that they can be revived in the future when medical technology (underwritten by Capitalism) makes resuscitation possible. (NYT story of freezing the brain (Read the story – ½ of all computing power to function that single brain). These desires and delusions about overcoming death are not fundamentally different than those of the Pharos.

Natural vs Political Death.

In this entire spectrum, from the biological/unconscious to the religious capitalization of the fear of death, what is at stake is “natural death” – death brought about by sickness, old age, or accident. Within the Western theoretical tradition,

Heidegger's stringent phenomenological critique lays bare the fundamental attributes that result from the acknowledgement of natural death: to use Heidegger's five-point definition, death is "one's ownmost, non-relational, certain, indefinite, and not to be outstripped." In a trajectory of commentary from Heidegger to Derrida's several books on death, death remains more or less "natural" in that it is seen as a part of the ontological structure of being. This is not death that is directed at any specific individual for any specific teleological reason. I believe that this modality of death must be radically distinguished from what I would call "political death," which is death that is directed at me (or at other specific human beings) in order to coerce me into following someone else's teleological program, which in turn includes his values, desires, etc., etc. The political deployment of the threat of death is a completely different kind of instrument than is the non-teleological existence of natural death. One important paradigm of political death is, of course, Hegel's articulation of the master-slave dialectic. That fight is clearly about one person's desire to control, own, and direct the life of another; that hypothetical fight as well as the very real fight between Covey and Frederick Douglass are prime examples of the attempt to transform the facticity of death as an existential event into a political instrument, one that relies entirely on the threat and fear of death.

We do not have the time here to enter into the very trenchant critiques (such as those mounted by Steve Biko, Jacques Lacan, Susan Buck-Morse, etc.) of Hegel's

“theorization” of political death. However, I would like to note two things in passing. **First**, if Hegel is correct in implying that every time two strangers meet one another, there ensues an inevitable, ontological fight to the death, then such a certainty would leave a powerful sedimented, record in cultural practice. Yet if one were to do an ethnographic analysis of the different greetings (and non-verbal greeting practices) used in various cultures when strangers meet, one would come up with the opposite understanding. Again we cannot do such an analysis here, but consider for a moment the implications of the Hebraic and Arabic (or Jewish and Islamic) greeting, Shalom or Salaam (peace be upon you): I believe that a systematic ethnography would reveal that in the vast majority of cultures strangers declare peace instead of war when they first meet. Is Hegel completely wrong or is there something else lurking in our anxiety to declare peace as soon as we meet a stranger. **Second**, after briefly using the threat/fear of death to establish a political economy of “self-consciousness,” Hegel moves away quickly from the struggle with death. While he is willing to deploy political death as a heuristic device (one tacitly designed to bolster the position of the white Euro-American master), he is really not seriously interested in understanding the political deployment of death. But I am, and so I will move on to the next horizon of political death that lies buried within Marxian theory.

Primitive Accumulation and Death.

David Harvey's work on what he calls "accumulation by dispossession" has revived significant interest in what is otherwise known as "primitive accumulation," which has been briefly defined as accumulation by **extra-economic** means. And we must remember that critics like Samir Amin and others have always insisted that the entire European colonization of the world, including slavery and the slave trade, have been a process of primitive accumulation. And a substantive debate has explored the differences and continuities between primitive and standard capitalist accumulation. It seems to me that Marx is fairly clear about the continuity:

"The capital relation presupposes a complete **separation** between the worker and the ownership of the conditions of the realization of their labour. As soon as capitalist production stands on its own feet, it not only maintains this **separation**, but **reproduces** it on a constantly expanding scale . . . it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers. So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of **divorcing** producer from the means of production." (874-75, emphasis added) (Divorcing = unbinding of erotic ties – separating of producer from means of production = undoing erotic bonds)

Massimo De Angelis has written a powerful article examining every facet of Marx's notion of the "separation" between the worker and his means of production. Yet neither he nor Marx ventures to define what actually produces this separation. The

closest Marx comes to such a definition is in statements like: “In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, **force**, play the greatest part [in the process of primitive accumulation].” But this begs the question: how exactly does “force” or violence function to create the separation not only between the worker and his/her land and other forms of property but also between the worker and his/her labor? What extent of violence is necessary to break the bond (an erotic bond) between the worker and his land or his labor? As scholars such as Wolff (complete citation) have shown, the British colonial forces in Kenya were not able to induce the indigenous people to commodify their labor and offer it on the market in exchange for wages even though the British appropriated native lands and killed all their livestock. They finally had to resort to the so-called poll tax, which could be paid only in British currency, which the indigenous people could only obtain by working for white farmers. And of course non-payment of the tax was deemed a crime, which resulted in dire consequences. In short, the commodification of labor, the tearing of labor away from the organic continuity of life, of which labor is an integral part, required various kinds of “forces” or forms of violence. If we think about slavery in these terms, then we quickly realize that, in addition to drastic use of violence, in the final analysis only the threat of death will force an individual “to agree” to behave, even temporarily, as a slave. And as I have argued elsewhere, the slave’s decision to continue behaving as a slave for years, and decades, and then perhaps being instrumental in passing on that behavior to

succeeding generations, constitutes a kind of tacit, unconscious contract. Such a contract is more tenacious than the contract of a wage-slave precisely because it is unconscious and because it is underwritten with the fear of immanent death.

In short, I am saying that the threat/fear of death is central to structure of primitive **and** capitalist accumulation. To be sure, the threat of death is far more naked and direct under slavery than under capitalism. But that is only because the wage-slave has been persuaded (or forced) by the ideological fiction of “free choice” and “voluntary contract” to feel that s/he is free to work or not work for an extortionist employer. But the underlying reality is that if that worker chooses not to sell his/her labor for starvation wages, then the only real options left for him/her is to live on the absolute margins of death and eventually to starve to death. Marx gives us the famous example of enclosures in England as case of primitive accumulation. Central to this form of primitive accumulation is that the enclosure movement forced peasants off common or communal land by “**privatizing**” that land. In short, **privatization of public property** is a central form of primitive accumulation. **(Current example = Greece)**. If so, then I would argue that the move from slavery to wage-slavery is nothing other than the “**privatization**” of the **threat/fear of death**: the slave was threatened with a lynching or an execution if he refused to cooperate; the wage-slave is left free to either work for starvation wages or he is free to commit slow suicide. Whether he works as a wage slave or chooses instead to die of starvation, his “freedom to choose” is celebrated as a part of the

freedom guaranteed by Capitalist political economy and so-called liberal democracies.

Marxian theory distinguishes between three factors of production: land, labor, and capital (capitalists want to add a fourth factor: entrepreneurship – but . . .). But if we are not to treat labor as an always already commodified object for sale, then we need to understand the following: that in the hands of the “master” (or the capitalist), the threat of death, which is deployed to separate the laborer from his property and to compel the commodification of his labor, **becomes a “means of production.” This is one of the fundamental points of this paper: namely, that the threat/fear of death is a means of production, and we must begin to explore its implications.** But at this stage of my research I am agnostic about whether that threat of death is indeed a means or a factor of production. What is clear to me, though, is that the threat not only separates the individual from his/her property and labor, but also from every fact of his or her life as a whole. Under slavery the threat of death is used to cannibalize the innermost capillary structures of subjectivity. I would like in a moment to analyze two small examples from slave and neo-slave narratives to demonstrate the penetrating capacities of death.

But before doing so, I would like to briefly outline one last theoretical horizon that enriches a thorough examination of the dialectics of death. Traditional Marxian analyses of “Reproduction of the Relations of Production” are confined to the macro-structural relations of political economy. Relatively recently, however, Marxian

feminist theoreticians such as Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvia Federici, and above all Mary O'Brien have extended this analysis into the realm of domestic production and even into the area of biological and cultural reproduction. Based on these explorations, a series of questions arise for me regarding ways in which death can enter the process of biological and cultural reproduction, a terrain explored by the four novels that comprise the core of my current book project (*Beloved*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Corregidora*, and *Kindred*). Each of these novels explores this problematic from a different angle. I will not have time to examine any of these novels in this paper. But let me provide you with a tantalizing morsel from Morrison's *Beloved*. When Paul D compares Sethe's value to his own (he cost the master \$900), he realizes that her value is infinitely higher than his because she is "property that can reproduce itself without cost." This is the dream of every slave owner and capitalist: reproduction without cost. In interrogating the site of reproduction from various angles these novels explore the political economy that is articulated around the site of birth in slavery: these writers know that slavery is a zero-sum game, that for everyone who benefits from this exchange there is someone else who pays all the cost. These novels also show us how the birth of every slave child is accompanied by death.

Jacobs & the Maternal Site (swimming pool – lived experience of death).

In turning briefly to appreciate the intervention of death in the maternal site as depicted by Harriet Jacobs, I would like to begin by noting the heroic and iconic status now accorded to the two-hour battle to the death between Douglass and Covey. However, that heroism seems romantically luxurious from a maternal viewpoint. Consider very briefly Harriet Jacobs' perspective. Her protagonist, Linda Brent, uses her biological capacity for impregnation and maternity as a **political** weapon to protect herself from the master's lascivious reach, and Jacobs also deploys the prevailing trope of maternity very effectively in the **literary construction** of her autobiographical novel – she plays very well on the cult of true womanhood. But maternity is both a weapon and a liability for Jacobs. In the prolonged struggle against her master she makes it quite clear that she, like Douglass, would prefer death rather than slavery. But the only thing that stops her choosing the possibilities of death is her concern for what would happen to her children without her protection. Her maternal status requires a significantly different approach to death. Her seven-year sojourn in the garret of her grandmother's house – a period during which she experiences the severest form of social death and several times comes very close to actual death – is, in my view, the maternal equivalent of the two-hour battle between Douglass and Covey. We also need to appreciate that, driven by death, primitive accumulation not only separates the individual from his/her property and labor, but it also separates the slave mother from her children. And Jacobs' heroism lies in enduring that separation for

seven year. (Explain separation –cannot speak to children, etc.) One of the fundamental differences between the maternal and the non-maternal consciousness of the dialectics of death is best captured by Jacobs' feelings when her son is recovering from a serious, potentially deadly illness.

As the months passed on, my boy improved in health . . . I loved to watch his infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave. *Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy . . . Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery.* (62)

In short, this conflict between the **simultaneous** desire for life **and** for death renders the maternal site the most complicated and aporetic of all the subject-positions under slavery – it is indeed the site of impossible possibilities.

Now Harriet Jacobs began writing *Incidents* in 1854 and completed it around 1861. So, it is in the early stages of her composition that she must have become aware of the Margaret Garner incident, which took place in 1856. One can only speculate how that incident might have affected Jacobs' view of the mother's simultaneous desire for the life and death of her child. And Toni Morrison returns to the 1856 Margaret Garner in her famous novel, *Beloved*. So there is little doubt in my mind that Morrison is fully aware of Jacobs' view to the impossible relation between slave mother and child as she is of the Margaret Garner story. If under slavery life and death, eros and thanatos, are both instantly and insistently present

at the maternal site, then that struggle can produce a range of maternal subject positions. And Morrison diegetically explores these positions by arraying and dramatically, if implicitly, contrasting a series of maternal subject positions, but focusing the bulk of the attention on two mothers: Sethe and Baby Suggs, who apparently have very different attitudes to death as a mode of resistance. But alas we cannot explore these here – a thorough reading of *Beloved* would and should occupy several weeks in a seminar in order for us to appreciate the labyrinthine relationship between maternal Eros and Thanatos mapped by Morrison.

Mr Death and Ms life (Double helix)

So, instead of that I would like to end this paper with an analysis of Morrison's most general and highly stylized allegorical representation of the battle between life and death. Even a cursory reading of *Beloved* confirms that all its slave characters are bound by death in one form or another and that their living and dying are interminable and full of pain. Whenever Sethe recollects the horror of lynched bodies hanging from sycamore trees, it is the beauty of the sycamore trees that overcomes and displaces the lynched bodies, and Sethe feels that she can never forgive herself (or her memory) for this lapse of conscience. *Beloved* reveals that, like this struggle between the beauty of the trees and the terror produced by the dead bodies, the beauty of life and the horror of death, the joys of living and the pain of dying, **together** define the elementary components through which the existential experiences of slaves are woven. Microstructures of living and dying, one can say,

together constitute something like a double helix that forms the symbolic DNA of slaves. And the combinations of different modes of living and dying furnish the range of different subject positions occupied by death-bound-subjects on the asymptotic curve between life and death that is traced by this novel.

This double helix reaches its clearest expression in Morrison's allegorical, genderized rendition of life and death. Depicted in the midst of Paul D's incarceration in the chain gang in Georgia, the slaves are obliged to break rocks all day. They think of the rocks as simultaneously representing life and death, and in order to survive they beat both to death everyday. In this scene, death is represented as masculine, "Mr. Death," (in caps) and life is represented as feminine, but she is not just an ordinary woman; life is depicted as a flirtatious woman:

Singing **love songs to Mr. Death**, they **smashed his head**. More than the rest, they killed the **flirt whom folks called Life** for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it; that another stroke of time would do it at last. Only when she was dead would they be safe. The successful ones – the ones who had been there enough years to have maimed, mutilated, maybe even buried her – kept watch over the **others who were still in her cock teasing hug**, caring and looking forward, remembering and looking back. (128)

.....

“Eighty-six days and done. **Life was dead.** Paul D beat her butt all day every day till there was not a whimper in her. Eighty-six days and his hands were still, waiting serenely each rat-rustling night for ‘Hiiii!’ at dawn and the eager clench on the hammer’s shaft. **Life rolled over dead. Or so he thought.**”

(129, emphasis added)

The first, most elemental and almost tautological implication of this characterization of life as a “flirt” is that life is eros itself; it is pleasure, sexual or otherwise; but more crucially it is desire itself, which provides the fuel for life and pleasure; and the final implication is that life is the capacity for cathexis, for binding, which in turn is crucial for connecting desire and its objects. Thus like the flirt, life is forever inviting one to succumb to desire and to bind with the objects of that desire. Morrison’s aporia thus defines the most fundamental nature of the double helix of life and death under slavery: the slave who wants to “live,” who wants to survive, has to ensure the success of that **particular desire** by beating to death the apparatus of his own desire in general as well as his capacity to bind with the objects of his desire. This is the case because any attempt to fulfill his desire can get a slave killed. A slave in such a predicament cannot afford to see death only as an external threat, an eventuality that is controlled by someone else. Instead, he must internalize that death and become the agent who will deploy it against himself, deploy it to police his desire for a “full” life, a life that binds with all the things in life

that give him pleasure, including wives, parents, children, etc. The slave's survival, his life, depends on him becoming a successful agent of death. And ironically, his success in this aporetic endeavor will ensure that he has effectively collaborated in his own formation as a death-bound-subject. Yet his production of himself as a death-bound-subject is never complete because life is always enticing; like a good flirt life is always inviting you to bind with her. And for the slave, life will always have to be beaten to death. Thus the slave is bound by this deathly struggle as long as he lives; the valences that constitute his subjectivity are condemned to oscillate constantly between life and death within that double helix.

This aporetic oscillation merits further theoretical considerations. The flirt, we must remember, not only entices desire but also implicitly promises to fulfill that desire; in other words, the flirt is both the source *and* the object of desire. If life is similarly the object/source of desire and if one has to beat it to death in order to survive, then that imperative raises a series of questions: How do you beat to death your desire for life? Do you kill desire itself? OR do you sever the link between desire and the capacity to bind? OR do you cut the link between the capacity to bind and the object of desire? OR, finally, do you kill the object of desire? It must be emphasized that a relatively coherent subject can be constituted **only** via an adequate set of bonds between various psychic apparatuses, and that the severance of anyone of these connections will debilitate normal subjective formation. We must also note that within this allegory Morrison insists that these processes of

severance to which the slave has to bind him or herself are neither just epistemic nor simply affective; they are that, but above all they are relations which demand a concrete, repeated praxis: these processes, like the daily breaking of stones, constitute repeated “investments” (cathexis) on the part of the slaves so that they can function effectively as death-bound-subjects. In case there is any doubt about the **erotic** nature of this binding with death, Morrison emphasizes it via Paul D’s eager, violent, and phallic bonding with his “hammer’s shaft” and via the fact that he can **only** bring his body under control by this form of bonding. This representation of what is required on the somatic register for Paul D to suture himself as an adequately death-bound-subject is echoed on the psychic register by the fact that these experiences “drove [Paul D] crazy so he would not lose his mind.” In order to survive, the slave has to participate in his/her own psychic disaggregation.

If an “ordinary” slave’s subject position demands such self-policing and disaggregation, then what does slavery do to the maternal slave’s desire? How does maternity as a site designed for the reproduction of life react to death’s invasion of that site and to the demand that the mother instead reproduce death-bound-subjects? Morrison allows us to theorize that under slavery maternity is a space and a moment in which the possibilities of life and death struggle against each other for mutual exclusion, but they also aporetically bind with each other at the microstructural level in the manner described above. So, we need to add here, that like Marx’s definition of the dialectical relations between use and exchange value,

the dialectical relations between life and death are in this context at once mutually constitutive **and** mutually exclusive. This impossible intertwining of the constitutive and the exclusive, which comprises a fundamental part of the double helix, is what makes Paul D tremble uncontrollably and what provokes Sethe to kill her own child.

Beloved is absolutely brilliant in its diegetic theorization of death-bound subjectivity. And in closing this paper with this very brief analysis of *Beloved*, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that this novel not only deeply and thoroughly maps the entanglement of eros and thanos but that the construction of the novel is itself a superb product of that entanglement: *Beloved* is a text that is at once excruciatingly painful **and** exquisitely pleasurable to read. Not only the capillary structures of the contents of the novel but also the capillary structures of its style are a product on a prolonged sojourn in the double helix of life and death produced by slavery. Toni Morrison once remarked that the writing of *Beloved* was like pitching a tent in a cemetery and trying to live in it for the duration of the writing process. I can think of no better way of formulating an appreciation of this commitment than to cite Derrida's comment about tarrying with death: "This concern for death," says Derrida, "this awakening that keeps vigil over death, this conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom". Morrison and the other writers that I will be examining in *Thick Love* have all tarried in the fields of death and mapped those fields so that we can better appreciate the tenacious

desire for freedom as well as the cost of freedom. These novels, more than any exegetic texts or analyses, point us in the direction of how we can begin to map the political economy of death.

Thank you for patiently listening to this very, very morbid paper.