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Postcolonial Entanglement: How the Carnavalesque Links Toni Morrison and Chris Abani in
Disruptive Dialogue

Undergraduate Honors Thesis
By Katherine B. Bamberger

University of Vermont, 2020

Advisors: Sarah E. Turner Ph.D., English & Lokangaka Losambe Ph.D., English
Committee Chair: Jeanne L. Shea Ph.D., Anthropology

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Abstract

This critical analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014) utilizes a postcolonial carnivalesque critical lens, informed by Lokangaka Losambe's innovative reinterpretation of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival for application to postcolonial texts. I pay particular attention to moments in these two texts in which inversions of "order" occur and analyze how these moments build towards the culmination of resistance by societally-marginalized figures. In tracing Morrison and Abani's reliance upon carnival disruption in texts revolving around institutional inequality, I hope to illustrate how the literary device of the carnival aligns with postcoloniality, and how this alignment inherently links two texts published twenty-seven years apart in an important conversation.

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Introduction

I first read Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014) one year after reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Despite this substantial gap in time between my initial readings of these two texts, the brief carnival scene in *Beloved* immediately reemerged in my mind as I read *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. The carnival scene in *Beloved* ultimately inspired my literary investigation for this project. Upon concluding my first reading of Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, I discovered that I read the entirety of his text through the framework of Morrison's carnival scene, thus considering Abani's work as an expansion of a component of Morrison's work. As I continued my research, I realized that not only did I read Abani's work as an expansion of this scene, but also I read Abani's work as an expansion of Morrison's work in its entirety.

In the interview "Chris Abani and Colm Tóibín in Conversation: April 28, PEN World Voices at KGB" (2006), Nigerian American author Chris Abani explains that the haunting nature of his texts emanates from the fact that "everything in Nigeria is about haunting" (Sussler, Abani, and Tóibín 33). Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* through a joint postcolonial lens reveals that their roots both exist in haunting experiences of institutionalized oppression. While conducting research for this project, I prioritized these questions: How does Abani's work in *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, published in 2014, expand upon the postcolonial conversation started by Morrison in *Beloved*, published in 1987? And, how does the concept of the carnivalesque encourage this literary conversation?

Before beginning my analysis, it is important to provide background information about these texts and the primary characters within them. Morrison's *Beloved* explores a mother's

lasting trauma from her experience within slavery and the emotional turmoil resulting from her decision to kill her daughter to resist her enslavement. The characters central to my analysis are Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Sethe is the mother within the text. She was enslaved on a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home, but during the present of the text – which is post-abolition – she lives free in Ohio with her daughter Denver. Denver is Sethe’s only child still living in their home at 124 Bluestone Road. I interpret Beloved to be the manifestation of the baby Sethe killed after gaining freedom in Ohio to protect her from becoming enslaved under the Fugitive Slave Act. She returns about 18 years later – during the present of the text – in the form of a young woman.

Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas* is a text composed of layers of haunting. On one level, it is the story of a Las Vegas researcher aiding a detective’s investigation while simultaneously facing the ghosts of South African apartheid. On another level, it is the story of conjoined twins resisting the government nuclear testing and resulting radiation poisoning that physically impacted them. Sunil, Salazar, Fire, and Water are the central figures in my analysis. Sunil is the researcher who works in a government psychiatric institute in Las Vegas that is involved in horrific testing on homeless men, resulting in large body dumps. He used to live in South Africa during apartheid. Salazar is the investigator working to solve the serial murder case related to these body dumps occurring in Las Vegas. Finally, Fire and Water are the conjoined twins who grew up as part of a sideshow and now perform with the Carnival of Lost Souls. At the beginning of the text, a ranger finds them trespassing in Lake Mead and reports them. Salazar arrests them as suspects in his serial murder case when he discovers a drum of blood near their car. Fire and Water go to Sunil’s institution for psychiatric evaluation, where they reside for most of the text.

In this critical analysis, I propose that Chris Abani not only engages with Toni Morrison, but also continues from where she leaves off within postcolonial discourse. By analyzing the work of Morrison and Abani together, I recognize that they produce texts that function in remarkably similar ways, despite the great difference in their stories. I intend to articulate how their reliance on the mode of the carnivalesque leads to their inherent entanglement within the larger realm of postcolonial literary discourse.

Literature Review

Since Toni Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, there already exists an array of postcolonial analyses of this text, which I prioritized in my accumulation of sources. In addition to these critical essays, I also include in this literature review other writings of Morrison's that are relevant to the consideration of *Beloved*. The existing literature surrounding the work of Chris Abani – and, more specifically, *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014) – is not yet as vast as that surrounding Morrison's *Beloved*. I supplement critical essays about Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* with additional relevant sources, including some of his other works and interviews. I first engage with the sources relevant to my consideration of *Beloved* and then engage with those crucial to understanding *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, presenting both bodies of previous scholarship chronologically to acknowledge the development of theoretical ideas about these texts and authors over time.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

It is first crucial to consider where Toni Morrison places herself within a discourse surrounding the portrayal of history within fiction, especially in her 1992 work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In her preface, she discusses the concept of an “autobiographical novel,” which seems fitting in a piece in which she considers how her identity influences both her writing and her position within the literary sphere. Following her discussion of the “autobiographical novel,” she delves into a discussion regarding her perception of “blackness” from her perspective as a female African American author. She expands this discussion to considerations of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness,” emphasizing that “until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white” (Morrison xii). In her first chapter following the

preface “Black Matters,” Morrison expands the discussion she introduces in her preface. She criticizes the American literary canon, explaining that it ignores the impact that African and African American people have had on American fiction. She states that this lack of representation within the body of seminal works – this absence from something of cultural influence – suggests that these groups of people are somehow less “American” than others. A method for trying to understand this resulting “literary whiteness” is to investigate “literary blackness.”

During this same year, Linda Krumholz discusses the concept of “rememory” as a primary method for healing in *Beloved* in her critical essay “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (1992). She identifies the character of Beloved as the central healing agent. According to Krumholz, “As an eruption of the past and the repressed unconscious, Beloved catalyzes the healing process for the characters and for the reader; thus, she is a disruption necessary for healing” (Krumholz 397). Like in Krumholz’s analysis of *Beloved*, in my analysis of *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* from a postcolonial carnivalesque perspective, characters’ disruptive power becomes central. Beloved, Fire, and Water invert “order” within their respective texts, and my reading of these texts together relies upon these inversions.

Sally Keenan’s “‘Four Hundred Years of Silence’: Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (1993), a postcolonial-feminist reading of *Beloved*, ultimately seems to exist as a literary response to Morrison’s contemplations regarding African and African American authorship in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). She describes *Beloved* as a representation of the way that African American women contribute to the rewriting of history. Within this essay, Keenan defines *Beloved* as a seminal postcolonial text

in that it not only addresses internal colonialism of the institution of United States slavery, but it also addresses the African diaspora. Keenan's postcolonial reading expands to incorporate aspects of a feminist reading as she investigates how experiences of connection and separation within mother-child relationships parallels experiences of connection and separation between people of African descent and their histories.

Four years later, Barbara Christian investigates how the institution of slavery affected the persistence of love, especially between a mother and her child. In her 1997 piece "Beloved, She's Ours," Christian discusses how slavery made it difficult for love to exist freely when people were not themselves free, and she focuses on "how love straddles that space between freedom and ownership" in *Beloved* (Christian 38). This fraught space that love occupies manifests in the text as the life-draining relationship between Sethe and Beloved (Christian 38).

This dynamic becomes the representation of how slavery affected relationships between a mother and her child. Beloved is a similarly important figure in Deborah Horvitz's 1998 publication of "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*." Horvitz interprets Beloved as a ghostly presence embodying the relationship between all mothers and all daughters tied to both Africa and the United States, and this presence sparks Sethe's "rememory" of her own story.

As Sethe struggles to acknowledge and "re-member" her own traumatic history, so have other people. In her 1999 publication "Toni Morrison's *Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text*," Mae G. Henderson investigates how Morrison provides voices to the stories that others historically have been unable to share. She emphasizes ways in which gender identity contributes to the suppression of stories and considers how Morrison tries to combat this within *Beloved*. Morrison resists narratives relating experiences of slavery from the dominant

perspectives of masters and of men. Henderson explains that white men historically have had the power to “inscribe” and black women have historically been the people “written and written upon,” as the scar radiating across Sethe’s back in the pattern of a “tree” illustrates in *Beloved* (Henderson 87). Sethe – who works to develop her self-understanding free from the influence of that which Schoolteacher’s nephews literally “wrote” upon her back with a whip at Sweet Home – is the primary character in Henderson’s analysis. Henderson, with a similar sentiment to Krumholz, suggests the power of the concept of “rememory” in this process of constructing a sense of self.

Susan Corey’s “Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (2000) provides an interesting reading of how Morrison implements this historical rewriting in a way that impacts her readers.¹ Corey considers *Beloved* through the perspective of the grotesque, which she defines as “a multi-faceted aesthetic phenomenon that enables the artist to disrupt the familiar world of reality in order to introduce a different, more mysterious reality” (Corey 31). Tracing the origin and development of the idea of the grotesque, Corey suggests that in *Beloved*, Morrison implements aspects of both the positive, or comic, grotesque – as Mikhail Bakhtin develops – and the negative, or uncanny, grotesque – as Wolfgang Kayser develops. Susan Corey suggests that consideration of the grotesque accounts for Morrison’s ability to establish readerly discomfort through her presentation of a nontraditional, intimate reality of slavery in *Beloved*.

Also during 2000, Mary Jane Suero Elliott engages with the idea that the objectivity of slavery’s colonialism hinders a person’s construction of subjectivity. In the essay “Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” she

¹ Whenever I refer to “readers” within this analysis, I refer to literary scholars in a classroom setting and fellow literary critics for whom most literary criticism is written.

expresses that, due to the “internalization” of the “colonizing discourse,” this hindrance continues long after slavery officially ended, in the form of resistance to the development of an individual’s sense of self (Suero Elliott 1). However, there exists an alternate discourse through which to define the self, and this discourse is that of the collective. Suero Elliott presents the idea that *Beloved* reflects the ability of people to “decolonize” themselves through collective action.

Following along the framework that Krumholz, Horvitz, and Henderson lay down almost a decade before her, Claudine Raynaud enters into the conversation about the role of memory in *Beloved*. In her 2007 piece “*Beloved* or the shifting shapes of memory,” she provides an interesting contemplation of the role of memory on the levels of both content and form in the text. Raynaud understands that Morrison develops people’s memories of their experiences in slavery as a central component of the text’s content and presents these ideas in a form that “[mimics] and [reflects] the process of memory” (Raynaud 44). Ultimately, at the heart of Morrison’s decisions regarding this content and form in *Beloved* is her desire to create a textual experience in which readers endure that which the people within the text endure: they are “snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign” (Raynaud 44). It seems that in this process, readers of *Beloved* become entangled with the memories that Morrison presents. Raynaud, like Corey, describes the uncomfortable reading experience that Morrison constructs.

Toni Morrison’s recent work *The Source of Self Regard* (2019) brings contemplations of scholarship on *Beloved* full circle. Like in her own *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) and in the critical essays that theorists write about *Beloved*, Morrison returns to the idea of historical representation. Toni Morrison, in the section “On *Beloved*” within *The Source of Self Regard*, furthers the conversation of the exclusionary nature of traditional approaches to the writing of United States history by discussing her problematic

relationship with history. She explains that in historical accounts she read during her schooling, there existed either a lack of representation or representations that she did not wish to confront. When those suppressed stories are included in historical accounts, however, they tend to be presented as “footnotes” within the rest of the historical narratives (Morrison 281). The problematic ways that United States history tends to be written impacts the public’s understanding – or, perhaps more accurately, misunderstanding – of national history. She then delves into a discussion about the origin of the story of *Beloved*, focusing especially on inspirations past and present. She discusses the impact of the story of Margaret Garner – a female slave who killed her child – and the idea of childlessness representing freedom during women’s movements on her writing of this text. Her final contemplations within this chapter relate her motivation to see and present the reality of a life in slavery from the perspectives of slaves themselves within *Beloved*.

The idea of memory’s role – which many theorists analyze in their critical work on *Beloved* – also arises within Toni Morrison’s *The Source of Self Regard*. In multiple sections, Morrison addresses the relationship between memory and the development of her literary works. In the section “Rememory,” she discusses her prioritization of “memory rather than history because [she] knew [she] could not, should not, trust recorded history to give [her] the insight into the cultural specificity [she] wanted,” due to the historical suppression of stories (Morrison 323). This memory that she turns to as her primary informant in her literature contains her “own heritage of slave narratives” (Morrison 323). She expands upon these ideas in “Memory, Creation, and Fiction” by differentiating between memory and research. She expresses, “Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and

why it appeared in that particular way” (Morrison 327). The ideas present within Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) and *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019) ultimately construct a framework for the literary criticism on *Beloved* that arises in the time between their publications.

Chris Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas*

A central theme permeating many of Chris Abani’s interviews is the influence of his identity on his writing. In Chris Abani’s 2006 interview “Chris Abani and Colm Tóibín in Conversation: April 28, PEN World Voices at KGB,” Abani discusses his life and identity, which both impact his work as an author. In this interview with Colm Tóibín, Chris Abani focuses on those who influence his writing as well as his place as an author within Nigerian literature. He explains that he and many other “writers within [his] generation...[resist] that performance” that is found within Chinua Achebe’s writing, explaining that while he is a seminal Nigerian author, Achebe “performs a certain reassuring expectation of Africa” (Sussler, Abani, and Tóibín 32). Abani does not write that which is expected, and he instead finds his greatest inspiration in the works of James Baldwin, such as *Another Country* (1962). In considering Nigerian literature within this interview, he contemplates whether or not there truly exists such a thing as “the Nigerian novel.” He also shares that the haunting ideas that permeate his work stem from the fact that “everything in Nigeria is about haunting” (Sussler, Abani, and Tóibín 33).

In “An Interview With Poet and Fiction Writer Chris Abani” in *Poets & Writers* that same year, Abani also contemplates identity and culture, focusing on his novels *GraceLand* and *Becoming Abigail*. Despite his focus on these novels in this 2006 interview, his conversation remains relevant to my analysis of *The Secret History of Las Vegas* because of his discussion of the grotesque. Abani introduces his “idea around how the grotesque or the surreal or the painful

– sometimes ritualized through art – becomes a preparation for death. Or the afterlife” (Singer). His concept of the grotesque acting as a precursor for death and what follows becomes useful to consider in my carnivalesque analysis of Chris Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Perhaps “death” can represent the periods of oppression and persecution that haunt the characters in these two texts. Focusing on the grotesque aspects of these texts reveals how the characters oppose that which haunts them so that they can enter the “afterlife” following this oppression.

The next year, Kate Durbin talks with Chris Abani in the 2007 interview “Guest Interview – Chris Abani” on *The Elegant Variation*. In this interview, Abani touches upon the subjects of religion, identity and development of a sense of self, the wild nature of cities that “resist classification,” and the significance of water (Durbin). This last topic is relevant to my analysis of Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas* in conjunction with Morrison’s *Beloved*. Abani states:

There is something about water that does this, its flow, its ability to absorb history, the dead, and the desire of a people. Water is also closely associated with birth and femininity and most rivers and other large bodies of water are linked to goddesses...On another level, water is the oldest symbol for change, for transformation and transubstantiation even, from baptism to erosion. (Durbin)

These ideas of water “absorbing history” and representing “transformation” provide insight for my analysis of Abani’s and Morrison’s texts, especially when focusing on the introduction of characters who emerge from sources of water. These characters, I will argue, can be seen both as embodiments of absorbed history and as agents of upcoming transformation.

In 2011, Chris Abani and literary critic Francesca Giommi engage with the idea of identity, both that of Abani and his characters. While Abani writes his piece “Coming to America – A Remix” from the second person perspective, he relates personal experiences working as an author within the United States. In this piece, Abani contemplates common misconceptions in the United States regarding his self-perception of his identity, such as the assumption that his race exists as a defining component of his identity in Nigeria. He shares that, unlike in the United States where he is conscious of his race, in Nigeria – as in other African countries – national and ethnic identities are much more defining components of identity. Through these considerations, Abani comes to recognize his increased awareness of his identity rooted in Nigerian Igbo culture since moving to the United States. He expresses a feeling of now being more deeply connected to his home in Nigeria than he did when he actually lived there.

In terms of character identity within Abani’s texts, Francesca Giommi, in “Negotiating Freedom on Scarred Bodies: Chris Abani’s Novellas,” highlights that his characters tend to be outsiders, navigating life on the margins of their societies. Because of this permeating trend in Abani’s writing, Giommi claims that “his work can be read as a lasting tribute to the triumph of the human spirit, and a claim to the worldliness of literature and – on a wider level – of belonging, freedom, and humanity” (Giommi 183).

Chris Abani continues his discussion of identity in his memoir *The Face: Cartography of the Void* (2014). This memoir revolves around Abani’s experience growing up with a dual identity: European English on his mother’s side and Nigerian Igbo on his father’s side. He expresses how he feels as though his face – what people can see, or at least believe they can see, in his appearance – defines him. Through focusing primarily on his Igbo heritage, Abani constructs a narrative memoir relating not only his experiences with a biracial identity, but also

his experiences with his father's identity. He wears this identity upon his face, forcing him to confront their complicated relationship.

Three 2017 pieces relevant to my consideration of Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* revolve around postcoloniality. In "The World after Empire; or, Whither Postcoloniality?", Kavita Daiya discusses Homi Bhabha's work *The Location of Culture* (1991) and the development of the idea of postcoloniality. Daiya writes about Bhabha's belief that postcolonial writing must "take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" by focusing upon those with previously-ignored histories (Daiya 149-150). Limitations exist within previous postcolonial studies due to the exclusionary nature of focusing on the nation as a central unit, especially for people displaced or those who do not affiliate with their national identities. She also discusses the power of "cultural memory" on survival (Daiya 151).

Abani engages in a related conversation in his 2017 interview "A Deep Humanness, A Deep Grace: Interview with Chris Abani." In considering his place within the Nigerian literary tradition, he places himself within a defined "third generation of Nigerian authors" in which female authors are central (Goyal 229). Like Morrison, Abani expresses his desire to tell those haunting stories that history suppresses. Much of what he shares within this interview revolves around his role as a writer within a global context. He discusses the concept of transnationalism – expressing his belief that the local is still very much involved in the transnational – as well as the global transcendence of racism. Regarding postcolonialism, he shares that he believes "certain colonial moments bind certain postcolonial peoples not necessarily in the reading of literature, but in the living," emphasizing the fact that postcolonialism is so much more than just

an aspect of literary theory. Within this interview, something interesting and relevant to Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* is his designation of Las Vegas as an African city.

Also in 2017, Mitchum Huehls extends this conversation in "Juggling the Dialectic: The Abyss of Politics in Chris Abani's Fiction" as he considers the postcolonial placement of Abani's characters. He discusses how his central characters – who Giommi deems "outsiders" – all experience the haunting of their traumatic pasts within their present. Huehls suggests that while the histories of Abani's characters influence their lives, they do not wholly determine them, entering into a discussion regarding if and how personal experiences and histories can be considered political. He provides two ideas that stand out as particularly important with regard to this consideration. He believes "Abani signals his reluctance to draw too much meaning and significance from the subject inserted into historical narrative" as "anthropomorphizing history does not actually tell us very much about history itself," and Abani's characters "are not appropriating a history that never happened to them but are instead living and experiencing historical violence every day in the present" (Huehls 161 and 165).

The next year, literary critic Miriam Pahl also enters the conversation revolving around the postcolonial nature of Abani's texts. In the 2018 piece "Reframing the Nation-State: The Transgression and Redrawing of Borders in African Crime Fiction," Pahl focuses on two novels by two authors, one of which is Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. This critical essay revolves around Pahl's criticism of applying postcolonial theory to these texts due to the fact that postcolonial theory centralizes the concept of the nation, and it has been a historical tendency to understand crime fiction within the national context. Pahl emphasizes that moving towards a transnational context is not even enough for consideration of these texts due to the fact that at the heart of transnationalism, the nation still resides as the point of reference. Rather, post-

nationalism is the answer for consideration of how the pieces of literature upon which Pahl focuses – including *The Secret History of Las Vegas* – escape the bounds of national limitation. In reference to *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, Pahl emphasizes the fact that “the federal republic of the United States and the system of racial segregation in South Africa are closely aligned, which...defies the opposition of ‘Africa’ and Euro-America that was...widely distributed in colonial discourses” (Pahl 95).

I recognize the significance of these critical sources revolving around postcolonial understanding of Morrison’s *Beloved* and Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas* and draw upon segments of these works in developing my joint critical analysis of these two texts. While acknowledging the postcolonial critics who came before me, I also intend to present an original analysis that diverges from the scholarship already in existence. Looking to Lokangaka Losambe’s “Carnival as an Embedded Narrative in Mbulelo Mzamane’s Short Stories” (2000) is crucial to understanding the perspective from which I approach *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. In this essay, Losambe provides an innovative perspective of the carnivalesque, as it applies directly to postcolonial literary criticism, upon which I will draw in my investigation of Morrison and Abani’s texts. Losambe enters into a conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophies about the carnivalesque, explaining that “Bakhtin has regarded this fusion of death and life as an essential condition of the regenerative carnival spirit” (Losambe 29). Extending Bakhtin’s perception of the literary carnival, Losambe identifies the existence of “carnival (dis)order” that exists in opposition to systems of oppressive “order,” and this “(dis)order” functions as an agent of revitalization for people escaping periods of oppression (Losambe 31).

My analysis of *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* from a postcolonial perspective, focusing especially on the mode of the carnivalesque, looks towards Lokangaka

Losambe's writing on the postcolonial literary carnival as a model. By considering Chris Abani's recent work as intertwined with Toni Morrison's seminal text, I emphasize the inextricability of new voices from older voices in postcolonial studies, suggesting the developmental nature of authors' use of the carnivalesque as a postcolonial device.

The Carnival as Literal Embodiment of the Carnavalesque

“In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead.”

– Toni Morrison, Foreword to *Beloved*²

In her foreword to *Beloved*, Toni Morrison identifies the centrality of the “disruption” of “order” to her commitment to constructing *Beloved* as a new narrative of slavery (Morrison XIX). This challenging of “order” exists as a crucial component of Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the carnival. According to Renate Lachmann in “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” Bakhtin “recognized...the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the center, the multiplicity of split-offs from the core”(Lachmann 116). In breaking away from and resisting authoritative ideology, Bakhtin conceptualizes “the carnivalesque game of inverting official values” to produce a new context in which “anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted” (Lachmann 118). Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque revolves around the creation of a unique space in which people can question and subvert dominant beliefs. While Bakhtin’s understanding of counter-culture is certainly relevant to my analysis of both Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Chris Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, his initial conceptualization of the carnivalesque does not go far enough in terms of its relevance to my postcolonial readings of these texts.

Kavita Daiya (2017) focuses on the idea of postcoloniality, drawing upon Homi Bhabha’s thoughts regarding postcolonial writing. According to Bhabha, postcolonial writing “[takes]

² This passage comes from page XIX of the foreword to the 2004 edition of *Beloved*.

responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” by paying attention to previously-ignored histories (Daiya 149-150). Incorporating the carnival in literature becomes a method for bringing these “unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” to the forefront of readers’ consciousnesses (Daiya 149-150). Because inverting dominant ideology through carnival action helps provide authority to those who were previously silenced – which Bhabha calls for in postcolonial writing – the carnivalesque seems to naturally align with postcolonial literature. Lokangaka Losambe’s (2000) innovative reconceptualization of the postcolonial carnivalesque emphasizes the distinct power of the carnival in postcolonial texts, providing the carnival framework necessary for my analysis of *Beloved* in conversation with *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. Losambe argues that “carnival (dis)order” exists in opposition to systems of oppressive “order,” and this “(dis)order” functions as an agent of revitalization for those previously oppressed (Losambe 31). In my analysis, I will continue utilizing Lokangaka Losambe’s term “(dis)order” rather than “disorder” when referencing disruptive actions in these texts to connote the intentionality of characters’ disruptions.

The revolutionary freedom gained from carnival action is thus the central concept driving my analysis of *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. Both Morrison and Abani incorporate carnival scenes – critical moments in which the carnival nature of these texts can be seen in its truest form – framing my postcolonial reading of their texts through the literary mode of the carnivalesque. While these carnival scenes arise at different points in the progression of the texts – near the beginning of *Beloved*, in conjunction with *Beloved*’s emergence, and during the last third of *The Secret History of Las Vegas* – they both exist as influential moments, urging forward my postcolonial carnivalesque reading of these texts.

My analysis focuses on inversions of typical “order” in *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, and these inversions create moments of intentional readerly discomfort.

Uncomfortable moments draw readers’ attention. While an audience is thus engaged, authors can encourage readers’ confrontation of the realities they portray in their texts (Corey). I intend to illustrate how the characters Beloved, Fire, and Water’s defiance of “normative” expectations in these texts contributes to the development of authority for those previously residing in positions of societal marginalization. The inverted, disruptive actions of these different characters ultimately inspire both texts to move towards revolutionary conclusions: culminations of the revitalization stemming from their “(dis)order” that challenges oppressive power (Losambe 31). Focusing on reclamation of authority reveals the development of these postcolonial authors’ reliance upon the carnivalesque to construct agents of liberation in their texts, ultimately creating the space for reading *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* as two texts entangled in a meaningful postcolonial conversation. So, what better place to start my investigation of this entanglement than at the two carnivals that “birth” these texts’ principle agents: the places where displays of “(dis)order” exist as the “norm”?

Morrison’s carnival scene exists as a three page section at the end of an early chapter in *Beloved*. The brevity of this scene – in which Sethe, Denver, and Paul D embark on a “family” outing to the carnival that opens its doors to African American people for one Thursday – reflects the reality of the respite it provides the people in attendance. This day at the carnival embodies the inversion of the “order” of the racially-oppressive society in which these people still live post-abolition, and this reversal is characteristic of the carnivalesque as a literary mode. Morrison writes that those in attendance find themselves:

Breathless with the excitement of seeing whitepeople loose: doing magic, clowning, without heads or with two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton, completely tattooed, eating glass, swallowing fire, spitting ribbons, twisted into knots, forming pyramids, playing with snakes and beating each other up. (Morrison 57)

For this day, the African American audience holds power in its gaze, becoming the observers rather than the observed. While the carnival-goers do not escape racial oppression – as white carnival workers talk to them using racist language – Morrison illustrates how the carnival context momentarily alters the impact of these hateful words for these people by “[rendering them] fairly harmless” when coming from over-the-top carnival actors existing in a moment of societal inversion (Morrison 58). In developing this idea, Morrison explains, “Two pennies and an insult were well spent if it meant seeing the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves” (Morrison 58). This carnival moment in the text temporarily reverses societal positioning, and this reversal bestows power upon the attendees: a power that, at least for the afternoon, relieves people of the racism that surrounds them.

Perhaps the most inverted moment during the carnival is that in which Morrison writes, “When Wild African Savage shook his bars and said wa wa, Paul D told everybody he knew him back in Roanoke” (Morrison 58-59). This moment comes as the end of the carnival scene, so it is one of the last sentiments with which Morrison leaves readers. Paul D still holds power in his gaze as I discuss above, but now he looks upon a carnival performer who shares his racial identity. The fact that he can joke about a racist act within this carnival – and is met with laughter from the other attendees – shows the extent to which Morrison develops the inversion within this scene.

While the event of the carnival unites both the family and the community at the heart of *Beloved*, perhaps most important in regard to the carnivalesque nature of this scene is its positioning within the whole of the text and the inversion that extends from it rather than that which occurs within it. The carnival scene occurs at the end of the section preceding the chapter containing Beloved's emergence from the water near Sethe and Denver's home at 124 Bluestone Road. While these events exist separated in the space of the text by section breaks, they ultimately occur simultaneously. The fact that the carnival occurs in conjunction with the entrance of Beloved – the primary character from which the carnivalesque elements of the text extend – suggests that the three page scene begs to be used as a framing device for consideration of the remainder of the text.

The carnivalesque inversion of societal positing that occurs during the literal carnival is brief; however, the carnivalesque inversion that grows out of this moment in time – Beloved's disruption of the "order" in the lives of Sethe and Denver – not only lingers, but intensifies. Linda Krumholz (1992) suggests that Beloved represents "an eruption of the past and the repressed unconscious" and "is a disruption necessary for healing" (Krumholz 397). The freedom of the reversal at the carnival becomes overpowered as Sethe's traumatic history – taking the form of Beloved – recaptures her following its conclusion. As the text moves from one page to the next, Sethe's life becomes inverted, drawing her back into her past trauma before she can move forward to heal.³

From the text's first page, it becomes apparent that Sethe and Denver live a haunted life. In her first lines, Morrison writes, "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the

³ Mary Jane Suero Elliott writes about the "colonization" of the mind and subjectivity in her piece "Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (2000).

house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims” (Morrison 3). Sethe and Denver live with the ghost of another daughter Sethe killed to ensure she did not become enslaved. Despite experiencing disturbances that drive Sethe’s sons away, like when “two tiny handprints appeared in the cake,” Sethe and Denver coexist with this presence (Morrison 3). As the text progresses, this presence becomes more physically apparent. Morrison writes:

Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud). A breast-plate of darkness hid all the windows except one. Its dim glow came from Baby Suggs’ room. When Denver looked in, she saw her mother on her knees in prayer, which was not unusual. What was unusual (even for a girl who had lived all her life in a house peopled by the living activity of the dead) was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother’s waist. (Morrison 35)

Denver witnesses the form of a dress, without a body to fill it, clutching her mother. The invisible presence that had previously made herself known through disruptive actions now reveals more of herself: her form that has yet to be filled. Ten pages later, Denver addresses this sighting with her mother:

“Well, I think the baby got plans,” said Denver.

“What plans?”

“I don’t know, but the dress holding on to you got to mean something.”

“Maybe,” said Sethe. “Maybe it does have plans.” (Morrison 45)

Just fifteen pages after Denver expresses her belief that the dress sighting is a premonition for what will come with the ghost baby, Beloved emerges from the water, returning to 124 Bluestone Road in her full human form: a baby inhabiting a young woman's body. The inversion of Sethe and Denver's haunted reality can be seen in their comfort living with a ghost. Beloved's presence becomes much more intimidating in her human form, especially as she learns to move and talk as an adult. A ghost is a form with which Sethe and Denver can coexist: the essence of a memory. A human, on the other hand, is a being with whom they must interact: the confrontation of a memory.

As I mention above, the carnival scene appears in Abani's work much later than it does in Morrison's work. Unlike in *Beloved*, in which the carnival scene serves as an unexpected momentary escape for both the characters and the readers, the carnival scene in *The Secret History of Las Vegas* exists as a moment towards which the text consciously progresses. This carnival represents the scene for which readers wait: the scene that begins to answer questions regarding the conjoined twins Fire and Water. Readers become familiar with the fact that Fire and Water work as part of the sideshow King Kongo, which performs in a carnival located in Troubadour. But, it is not until the last third of the text that readers actually arrive at the Carnival of Lost Souls, where they can see for themselves the context from which Fire and Water emerge.

One hundred eighty-three pages into the three hundred nineteen page text of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, Sunil and Salazar travel to the carnival to find answers about Fire and Water, who Sunil is watching in his psychiatric institution and who Salazar is investigating as suspects in a case regarding Las Vegas serial murders. As Sunil and Salazar drive into Troubadour:

[Sunil] was reminded for a moment of Eugene and his love for Dante and the circles of hell. He hated to admit it, but Eugene had been right in his choice of *Inferno*, except their interpretations differed. Where Eugene saw only the internal battle of the privileged soul, Sunil saw the entire architecture and structures of racism and apartheid: three concentric circles of life and economics. Color-coded circles for easy understanding, whites at the heart, coloreds at the next remove, and finally, the blacks at the outermost circle; the closest to hell – the strange inverse sense of apartheid. (Abani 185)

As Sunil approaches the carnival, he contemplates the institutional segregation of South African apartheid through the lens of Dante’s conceptualization of the circles of hell. The fact that Sunil reflects upon this system as he nears the carnival suggests the potential for applying this conceptualization of power dynamics to the carnival itself. Within this oppressive system, those with the most power resided in the “core,” and those with increasingly less power resided in rings circling further and further from this “core.” In my reading, I am going to invert the oppressive conceptualization of these societal rings – defined by those subscribing to the ideology of apartheid – by returning to the idea of the “core” being closest to hell. From this perspective, those with the most societal power represent hell, and those disempowered by “core” figures reside on the “periphery,” where they have the potential to claim “the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the center,” according to Bakhtin (Lachmann 116).

Sunil and Salazar arrive at the Carnival of Lost Souls and seek out Fred, the woman in charge of the carnival and Water’s love interest. While talking to Sunil and Salazar, Fred shares, “Everyone in the carnival is mutated in some way...and we all come from within one hundred miles of each other,” which Sunil recognizes to mean that all of the carnival workers are

“Downwinders” (Abani 205). The physical effects of radiation poisoning stemming from nearby nuclear testing represents the commonality linking those involved in the performance and organization of the Carnival of Lost Souls. Thinking about how these people, marked by deformities resulting from the testing done by those in power, exist on the outskirts of society – in a “ghost town” – suggests a system that resembles the rings of segregation Sunil describes during apartheid (Abani 215).

These people who live in a ring of society far from the “core” ultimately exist as a representation of the “the multiplicity of split-offs from the core” (Lachmann 116). Even though “core” members who conduct nuclear testing designate their “outsider” status by poisoning them with nuclear radiation, these people consciously “split-off” from the “core” by embracing their resulting “peripheral” community. In providing context for the inception of the carnival, Fred shares, “My father used to run this carnival before me. He was deeply religious and he believed it was his divine mission to take care of the deformed, so wherever we traveled, we tracked down locals with deformities and offered them a life of dignity with the carnival” (Abani 207). The Carnival of Lost Souls becomes the hub of a counter-culture composed of those whose lives are physically affected by nuclear testing. Systemic inequality affects these people – pushing them to this societal ring on the outskirts of Las Vegas civilization – but they regain power within this ring through forging a community in which they celebrate differences as the norm in a state of “joyous anarchy” (Lachmann 118).

Fred states that “all lost souls come to commune at the carnival,” which is “the closest thing the twins have to a home” (Abani 215). She emphasizes that the Carnival of Lost Souls is not only a show. It is a home. This nightly event becomes an escape for people: an escape in which both carnival workers and attendees gain new life in the company of others who are

“lost.” Abani does not describe carnival members other than Fire, Water, and Fred – besides that they are all Downwinders – and he does not describe any of the carnival’s attendees. The fact that thousands of people lack description – other than the generalization that they are all “lost” – reflects their marginalized status.

But, the fact that this community blends audience members with performers creates a context of empowerment. As I will discuss later, this blurring of the distinction between “spectators” and “actors” is a distinct characteristic of Bakhtin’s carnival: a location in which people reclaim authority through subversion of dominant ideology (Bakhtin 7). The Carnival of Lost Souls exists as a place where all of those marginalized within society – by those at the “core” of the societal hierarchy – gain power in unity. They create communal “(dis)order” in response to the unequal distribution of the impacts of radiation poisoning (Losambe 31). Mary Jane Suero Elliott (2000), while focusing on the text of *Beloved*, discusses the role of community in a way that can be applied to the Carnival of Lost Souls. She suggests that when people’s “internalization” of a “colonizing discourse” impedes their abilities to develop senses of selves, they can instead define themselves through the “collective” (Suero Elliott 1). The Carnival of Lost Souls exists as a place in which the prioritization of building a community gives authority – and “a life of dignity” – to the people who physically absorbed the effects of Las Vegas societal inequality (Abani 207).

Abani incorporates the voice of the “core” through Salazar’s character. After first hearing about the existence of Downwinders, Salazar questions the reality of the situation:

I’m still not sure I’m buying this Mulder and Scully crap about the government and nuclear tests that can harm its own people, Salazar said. I mean this is America, for fuck’s sake.

That's partly how it works, Sunil said. The clinical term is cognitive dissonance, and trust me, a whole country can be infected by it.

So you're telling me that radiation sickness from one bomb set off in Nevada in the fifties infected thousands of people, Salazar said. Give me a fucking break.

We aren't talking about one bomb from the fifties. I don't think you fully appreciate how extensive the testing is. Most of the current nuclear tests are conducted at five-thousand-foot depths right by the water aquifers that give this entire area its water – I mean, all the civilian populations, Indian reservations, farms, all of it, except the military base, which has its water brought in, to this day. This is the water most of us grew up drinking, bathing in, and watering our crops and livestock with. So you can imagine, Fred said.

The scale of it is staggering, Sunil said.

I still can't believe the government would knowingly go along with this, Salazar said.

(Abani 205-206)

Salazar, the detective, exists as the text's embodiment of "the law," and this legal authority does not believe that the government can be implicated in nuclear testing that harms so many people. This refusal to believe ultimately perpetuates oppression. So, while Salazar is not involved in the testing itself, his failure to acknowledge its existence and the reality of its effects contributes to the continuation of these people's suffering. It is the ignorance of people like Salazar – an individual implicated in the perpetuation of the discourse of the "core" – that traps Abani's characters in a position in which they "[live] and [experience] historical violence every day in the present" (Huehls 165).

The carnivals within both *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* introduce and provide insight into the "lost souls" upon which my reading depends. *Beloved*, *Fire*, and *Water*

are all products of institutionalized systems of inequality, and they exist as agents of change within their respective texts. In the following chapters, I will explore how both Morrison and Abani develop and utilize these disrupting agents who are all – in one way or another – born from the context of carnivals.

Carrying the Weight of the Dead in Life: Trauma that Haunts

“There is no refuge from memory and remorse in this world. The spirits of our foolish deeds
haunt us, with or without repentance.”

– Gilbert Parker, *Mrs. Falchion*⁴

Beloved, Fire, and Water emerge within their respective texts from bodies of water, “reborn” in adult bodies. With their aquatic emergence comes the promise of a second chance. By analyzing *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* through a postcolonial carnivalesque perspective, this second chance manifests as the possibility of counteracting that which damaged these characters in the past: Sethe’s experiences within the United States institution of slavery, for *Beloved*, and radiation poisoning from nuclear testing, for *Fire and Water*. In this chapter, I will compare the moments during which Toni Morrison and Chris Abani narrate their texts’ rebirths of these characters and delve into a consideration of how *Beloved*, *Fire*, and *Water* take advantage of their second chances through inverting the supposed “order” within which they find themselves in the texts. Since these characters emerge from water to inspire change through disruption, their entrances into their respective texts can be read as “apocalyptic baptisms.”⁵

On the page following the conclusion of the carnival scene in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison ushers *Beloved* into her text, writing,

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim of her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing

⁴ This passage comes from page 230 of Gilbert Parker’s *Mrs. Falchion*. Abani quotes Parker in his epigraph to *The Secret History of Las Vegas*.

⁵ Sarah E. Turner came up with the term “apocalyptic baptism.”

shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. Not because she was wet, or dozing or had what sounded like asthma, but because amid all that she was smiling. (Morrison 60)

Before the characters within the text realize that this woman may be “crawling-already? girl,” returned from the grave marked only by the word “Beloved” in the adult form she would have grown into had Sethe not killed her as an infant, I begin to suspect her identity (Morrison 110 and 5). From reading Toni Morrison’s foreword to *Beloved*, I understand that Morrison finds inspiration in the story of Margaret Garner, “a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation” under the Fugitive Slave Law (Morrison XVII). This knowledge primes my reading of *Beloved* so that, even before Morrison recounts the action, my interpretation of this text relies on the idea that the baby who haunts 124 Bluestone Road can be read as the baby Sethe killed to save her from being enslaved.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, this ghost of 124 becomes more and more present, beginning to fill the “white dress [which] knelt down next to [Denver’s] mother and had its sleeve around her mother’s waist” with a body (Morrison 35). This woman’s emergence from the water gives a form to the ghost baby. Her infant mannerisms – for example, her struggle to keep her eyes open in the passage above – suggest that it is a baby soul filling a young woman’s body. Later, *Beloved*’s initial difficulty walking and talking again suggests that her soul’s infancy does not align with her bodily form. The fact that this woman struggles to keep her head up – “her neck, its circumference no wider than a parlor-service saucer, kept bending and her chin brushed

the bit of lace edging her dress” – provides the best early evidence that she may not embody the soul of just any baby (Morrison 60). While struggling with the weight of the head is common for all babies, it represents a struggle even greater for Beloved. Later in the text, Morrison reveals that Sethe slit Beloved’s throat with a handsaw. So, of course keeping her head up is a trial for her. Morrison periodically reminds readers of this fact as other characters catch glimpses of the scar left on her neck. Nearing the conclusion of the text, “Sethe [sees] the scar, the tip of which Denver had been looking at whenever Beloved undressed – the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin” (Morrison 281). The juxtaposition of calling attention to a scar that serves as a reminder of infanticide with grotesquely innocent details, like its existence as a “shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place,” urges readers to remember that Sethe viewed killing Beloved as the ultimate act of motherly protection.

During the moment in which Sethe becomes aware of the figure of Beloved, Morrison writes:

And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity...the water she voided was endless...there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now...Just about the time she started wondering if the carnival would accept another freak, it stopped. (Morrison 61)

Sethe’s water breaks for a second time to signify Beloved’s second birth into her adult body. The inverted nature of this occurrence – Sethe’s water breaking, despite not being pregnant, with the return of her deceased infant in adult form – becomes heightened when Sethe “[wonders] if the carnival would accept another freak” (Morrison 61). Both characters within the text and readers of the text realize that these happenings are unusual.

This rebirth, which other critics analyze primarily from a feminist perspective, becomes important for my postcolonial analysis of the text through focusing on the context into which Beloved is reborn.⁶ Revisiting the moment in which Beloved stumbles from the water, I am most interested in the fact that “amid all that she was smiling” (Morrison 60). Beloved’s smile signifies that she has some knowledge of what happened to her, she understands what the act of returning means, and she feels excited to do so. She returns with an awareness of the disruption she will ultimately inflict upon Sethe’s life, and the second “smile” of the scar on her neck serves as a permanent reminder of her awareness of this disruption. Not long after her return, Denver asks Beloved about her origin:

“Tell me, how did you get here?”

“I wait; then I got on the bridge. I stay there in the dark, in the daytime, in the dark, in the daytime. It was a long time.”

“All this time you were on a bridge?”

“No. After. When I got out.”

“What did you come back for?”

Beloved smiled. “To see her face.”

“Ma’am’s? Sethe?”

“Yes, Sethe.” (Morrison 88)

Beloved’s admission to her desire see her mother’s face, accompanied by a smile, suggests that she returns to the living world with purpose.

⁶ Mae G. Henderson analyzes this same passage on page 94 of “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text*” (1999).

This pre-determined purpose becomes even more apparent upon realizing that *Beloved*'s emergence exists as the image from which the rest of the text was born. In her foreword, Morrison explains:

I sat on the porch, rocking in a swing, looking at giant stones piled up to take the river's occasional fist. Above the stones is a path through the lawn, but interrupted by an ironwood gazebo situated under a cluster of trees in deep shade.

She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat.

So she was there from the beginning, and except for me, everybody (the characters) knew it – a sentence that later became “The women in the house knew it.” The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it. (Morrison XVIII)

Reading *Beloved* with this knowledge, it becomes evident that from this text's conception, *Beloved* has agency. The character who “lost everything and had no say in any of it” holds the power that shapes the rest of the text (Morrison XVIII). The sense that the powerless – the individual killed in her infancy – retains the most power begins to make more sense when read through a postcolonial carnivalesque lens.

Beloved not only causes inversion, but she is herself an embodiment of inversion. Her own mother pushed her into the world of the dead, away from the “core” of the oppressive system that was the institution of slavery, or, in other words, hell. With an inverted perception of “freedom,” Sethe defends her desperate decision to kill one of her daughters – and attempt to kill her other children – in conversation with Paul D. She explains, “‘I stopped him,’ she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. ‘I took and put my babies where they’d be safe’” (Morrison 193). Paul D recognizes and fears Sethe's inverted sense that death equals true

freedom, and his terror is evident in his contemplation that “This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (Morrison 193). Beloved’s initial positioning on the “periphery” stems from her mother’s inverted sense of love and freedom. Literary critic Barbara Christian (1997) investigates slavery’s impact on love. She claims that when people were not themselves free, it was difficult for love to exist freely. While Sethe and her children lived free in Ohio when she killed “crawling-already? girl,” the threat of her children becoming enslaved under the Fugitive Slave Law drove her to associate freedom with death because of her inverted perception of love.

With Beloved’s return from the dead, she claims the autonomy she never had. She – the ultimate voiceless figure – has the greatest impact on this text from her “peripheral” position. Beloved thus becomes the manifestation of “unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” that Homi Bhabha calls for in postcolonial literature (Daiya 149-150). The fact that she reclaims the agency to disrupt after “[losing] everything” is what makes her a carnivalesque character (Morrison XVIII). She wreaks havoc on Sethe’s life as a way of resisting her past permanent silencing during the era of the Fugitive Slave Law, and this disruption, when it fails to revitalize her, contributes to Sethe’s ultimate revitalization. I will return to this idea of revitalization in my last analytical chapter “Final Flames: The Freedom of Revolution.”

Beloved returns simultaneously with the carnival, and she gradually turns Sethe’s life into a “carnival” itself. The central men in the text, Paul D and Stamp Paid, recognize that Beloved’s return on the day that the carnival opens its doors to the African American community correlates with the frightening impact she has on those around her. Stamp Paid asks Paul D, “How long she been over there with Sethe?” Paul D answers, “Last August. Day of the

carnival,” to which Stamp Paid replies, ““That’s a bad sign. Was she at the carnival?”” (Morrison 277). Stamp Paid wonders if Beloved came from among the carnival performers. While Beloved is not one of the carnival actors from that day, she is the main carnivalesque agent within Sethe’s increasingly carnivalesque life. She brings the “show” of “(dis)order” from that day with her (Losambe 31).

Beloved, the figure who urges Sethe to turn subconsciously inwards – confronting her personal history of enslavement through storytelling – also contributes to Sethe’s physical inward-turn within her home. With Beloved’s presence, Sethe’s life becomes an indoor “celebration” that excludes Denver once she realizes that Beloved and Sethe “were only interested in each other” (Morrison 283). Morrison characterizes the women of 124 Bluestone Road as “carnival-like,” and this characterization draws attention to their inverted actions. Denver’s positioning as a figure external to this “carnival” provides the anxious outsider perspective necessary to expose the troubling nature of the strengthening relationship between Beloved and Sethe. Morrison writes:

In the very teeth of winter and Sethe, her eyes fever bright, was plotting a garden of vegetables and flowers – talking, talking about what colors it would have. She played with Beloved’s hair, braiding, puffing, tying, oiling it until it made Denver nervous to watch her. They changed beds and exchanged clothes. Walked arm in arm and smiled all the time. When the weather broke, they were on their knees in the backyard designing a garden in dirt too hard to chop. The thirty-eight dollars of life savings went to feed themselves with fancy food and decorate themselves with ribbon and dress goods, which Sethe cut and sewed like they were going somewhere in a hurry. Bright clothes – with blue stripes and sassy prints. She walked the four miles to John Shillito’s to buy yellow

ribbon, shiny buttons and bits of black lace. By the end of March the three of them looked like carnival women with nothing to do. (Morrison 282-283)

Sethe dresses and feeds her girls in an excessive manner for the “celebration” that remains within the confines of their home, spending the last of her savings from the job she loses (Morrison 282). The frantic nature with which Sethe acts to adorn her daughters becomes evident through Morrison’s descriptions of Sethe’s “fever bright” eyes and her “[cutting] and [sewing] like they were going somewhere in a hurry” (Morrison 282-283). All the while, Beloved and Sethe remain smiling, expanding the threatening image of Beloved’s permanent smile so that it now incorporates Sethe. As time passes and spring arrives, Morrison writes:

[Beloved] filled basket after basket with the first things warmer weather let loose in the ground – dandelions, violets, forsythia – presenting them to Sethe, who arranged them, stuck them, wound them all over the house. Dressed in Sethe’s dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tacking scraps to cloth on Baby Suggs’ old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who. (Morrison 283)

Beloved and Sethe not only turn inside, but they also bring the outside world in with them. Sethe, covering their home with the flowers and weeds that Beloved collects, serves as the ultimate demonstrator of an inverted carnivalesque celebration. While Sethe and Beloved seem enthralled in the celebratory nature of their actions – “[walking] arm in arm and [smiling] all the time” and Beloved imitating Sethe to the point that they become virtually indistinguishable – Denver’s anxiety, evident in the two above passages, suggests the disruptive, threatening power of the

carnival context that her mother and Beloved create within their house (Morrison 282). In this “celebration,” Morrison employs the “joyous anarchy” of Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the carnival (Lachmann 118). What is interesting about this display of merry “(dis)order” is that readers see through it and recognize its threatening nature because of Denver’s exclusion from it (Losambe 31). She feels “nervous” watching her mother’s actions, signaling to readers that the “celebration” Beloved’s presence inspires will not last (Morrison 282).

In fact, as Beloved strengthens, Sethe weakens, and Denver watches the shift in power that occurs between Beloved and her mother:

Listless and sleepy with hunger Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved – her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long – everything except her basket fat stomach. She also saw the sleeves of her own carnival shirtwaist cover her fingers; hems that once showed her ankles now swept the floor. She saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out. (Morrison 286)

Morrison again relies upon references to the carnival as a means of depicting the change that the women undergo. The “shirtwaist” that Denver wore to the carnival no longer fits her; her shrinking body no longer fills it out. The fact that Morrison chooses to utilize Denver’s carnival attire as a measure of her diminishment because of the growing presence of Beloved – and the increasing attention her mother pays to Beloved – suggests that the carnival with which Beloved returns never ends. The day of inverted “order” turns into a life of inverted “order,” and this carnival life that Sethe and Beloved live becomes threatening. The fact that these women find “themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody

out” suggests that they are ultimately trapped within a “celebration” that is no longer celebratory. The “love that wore everybody out” ushers them into their final carnival state within their house (Morrison 286). Morrison writes:

Then it seemed to Denver the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. (Morrison 295)

The relationship that Sethe develops with Beloved becomes the postcolonial carnivalesque context in which Beloved, as a “peripheral” character, is able to reclaim power. Beloved drains Sethe’s energy by engaging her in an exhausting “celebration,” and in doing so, power dynamics shift, allowing Beloved to claim authority over her. Beloved resists Sethe’s inverted conception of freedom in death, regaining the autonomy she lost with her life through this role reversal.

An additional inversion of roles that is crucial to consider involves Denver rather than Beloved. With her exclusion from the “celebrations” of her mother and Beloved, Denver has the opportunity to observe these actions objectively. She recognizes the danger Beloved’s presence poses to Sethe, realizing that “the job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (Morrison 286). Morrison writes that “Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (Morrison 286). Denver assumes the role of the responsible adult, leaving the house and engaging with people in her community in order to help her mother. On the day that she sets out to do this, she leaves “in the brightest of the carnival dresses and wearing a stranger’s shoes, [and] she stood on the porch of 124 ready to be

swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch” (Morrison 286). Again, Morrison marks a moment of inversion – in this case, Sethe’s daughter taking on the role of an adult – by mentioning “carnival” attire. Denver’s actions begin the process of her and her mother turning outdoors rather than indoors, relying on community rather than their individuality to deal with their troubled past.⁷ Thus, the disruption *Beloved* causes urges Denver’s own inversion, and it is Denver’s inversion that ultimately helps inspire Sethe’s revitalization that I discuss in the following chapter.

Just as *Beloved* enters the text of *Beloved* by water, Fire and Water also enter *The Secret History of Las Vegas* by emerging from a body of water: Lake Mead. A ranger spots them illegally trespassing, observing:

The man in the water turned to the ranger, mouth moving, as though he were arguing with himself. He stood up straight and Green saw something attached to the man’s left side, something that had previously been submerged under the water, something flailing. Green thought it looked like a baby or, at the very least, a small child. But that didn’t make sense; surely the man couldn’t be drowning a baby. He reached for his radio and called the police. Looking up, he saw that the man in the water was hesitating in the shallows. Green returned the horn to his mouth.

Sir, get out of the water now. The police are on their way.

Whatever internal debate the man seemed to be having ceased at this information and as he advanced rather rapidly toward the ranger, he gave off an air of quiet threat. Green stepped back, realizing now that the man was in front of him, shirtless, that there had

⁷ Mary Jane Suero Elliott writes about the power of the collective in defining a sense of self in “Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (2000).

been no baby. In one glance he took in the second man, though to call him that was a stretch, hanging as he was like an appendage off the first one's side. (Abani 13)

This scene, while not as deliberate an image of “rebirth” as that in *Beloved*, exists as a “rebirth” of sorts nonetheless. In this moment, readers first become acquainted with the conjoined twins at the heart of the text, priming readers for how they will encounter these characters for the majority of the rest of the text: through the dehumanizing gazes of others. This ranger struggles to accept Fire as a man, instead referring to him as an “appendage” (Abani 13). This scene marks the beginning of the trend of dehumanizing language that figures of authority utilize in reference to Fire and Water during the entirety of the text. For example, when Detective Salazar arrives, finding a drum of blood near the twins' car – which he assumes to be connected to the serial murders he investigates – he arrests them, saying, “Come on, freaks like you, I can't be the first policeman who has cuffed you” (Abani 16).

Later, when Sunil brings the twins to the institute where he works for a psychiatric evaluation, Brewster – an employee involved in horrific human testing on homeless men with Sunil, resulting in the body dumps Salazar investigates – views Fire and Water as exploitable research subjects, rather than as people. He expresses to Sunil, “Their twinning is everything... We haven't had an opportunity to study monsters before. We need to run an MRI on them. Judging from the photo on file, we may need to ask the zoo to assist, because the twins clearly won't fit our own machines” (Abani 110). Not only does Brewster refer to the twins as “monsters,” but he also reduces them to the status of animals when he claims that they will have to take them to the zoo for an MRI.

This scene introduces much of what is to follow in the text of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*: the inhumane way that people treat Fire and Water, labeling them as “freaks,” and the

postcolonial carnival nature of the twins' resistance of oppression, reclaiming their status as "freaks." A hint of this upcoming resistance can be read in the "air of quiet threat" that Fire and Water portray when caught in Lake Mead, much like the threat within the menacing smile plastered upon Beloved's face following her emergence and the second menacing smile of the scar forever upturned on her neck (Abani 13). It is interesting to read this scene – in addition to the corresponding scene in *Beloved* – through Abani's interpretation of the power of water in his interview with Kate Durbin in 2007. In this interview, Abani states

There is something about water that does this, its flow, its ability to absorb history, the dead, and the desire of a people. Water is also closely associated with birth and femininity and most rivers and other large bodies of water are linked to goddesses...On another level, water is the oldest symbol for change, for transformation and transubstantiation even, from baptism to erosion. (Durbin)

When Fire and Water stand in Lake Mead, this body of water does, in fact, contain both "absorbed history" and agents of "transformation." Fire and Water serve as the text's manifestation of the injury of nuclear testing upon people living in the area surrounding Las Vegas – the "absorbed history" of this testing – and they exist as the main agents working to resist institutions responsible for harming people as the testing has done in this area. Much like literary critic Linda Krumholz (1992) says of *Beloved*, Fire and Water too live "as an eruption of the past and repressed unconscious" (Krumholz 397). Through their disruptive action, with which I will engage in both this chapter and the following, they become the ambassadors for their community composed of societally-marginalized individuals. By acting against major institutions, they claim authority for those made voiceless by institutional inequality and work to revitalize their community.

Besides the twins and their fellow carnival members affected by nuclear testing in Nevada, Sunil is the only external character who acknowledges the history of this testing. While driving around the city of Las Vegas during the beginning of the text – on the day that Salazar arrests Fire and Water at Lake Mead – Sunil observes:

The Halloween crowds poured up and down the Strip like a thick sludge. Fireworks, set off by the Bellagio, fired straight up and out of its fountains, filling the sky with mushrooms of dazzle. Sunil was reminded of the old bomb parties the casinos used to host back in the '50s, when the U.S. government set off nukes in the nearby desert, sometimes as close as six miles from the city. The casinos sold package tours to see U.S. history in the making: the end of the Commies and the death of the Red Threat. People flocked by the thousands to the dawn parties to watch the mushroom clouds. Minutes after the display, they would return to gambling or turn in to catch some much-needed sleep. Seats on the terrace, where one could watch the explosions while sipping on a cocktail, were fought over. (Abani 56)

This moment is loaded in terms of setting up the rest of *The Secret History of Las Vegas* to be read through a postcolonial carnivalesque lens. First, it is significant to note that the present context of this text – from the time of Fire and Water's arrest – begins on Halloween, a holiday rooted the celebration of becoming "other": an embrace of inversion. Second, it is important to understand that the nuclear testing that has harmed many people living in this area for years used to be viewed as entertainment for those who remained unaffected by its impacts. This history of the "celebratory" ritual of watching the nuclear clouds like fireworks defined those who resided in the "core" of society, sheltered from negative impacts, from those who lived on the vulnerable "periphery" of society. This is an important scene to keep in mind until the next chapter because

the final revitalization of societally-oppressed people within this text exists as an inversion of this scene.

As I mention above, Fire and Water become this text's manifestation of the "peripheral" resistance. Fire verbalizes the reality of their societal positioning, expressing to Sunil:

Look, Doc, this whole thing is loaded against us, Fire said. We can't win in a rigged game.

How do you mean exactly, Sunil asked.

I just don't think the justice system works for people like me, Fire said.

Are you saying you're above the law?

This is exactly my point, Doc. When I admit that I don't believe in this country's justice system, you think I'm saying I am above the law, which you might call a grandiose sense of self-worth. (Abani 117)

Fire talks to Sunil about how society is not constructed in a way that protects people "like [him]," or people existing on the "periphery" (Abani 117). When Sunil asks, "Are you saying you're above the law?" he supports the point Fire is trying to make in this conversation (Abani 117). Sunil, someone with authority in the text of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, represents in this moment the societal "core." By failing to understand that Fire means the law does not work in his favor, Sunil perpetuates the societal structure separating individuals on the "periphery" from those in the "core," at least in the context of Las Vegas institutions.

Power dynamics determine this social stratification, which results in continued institutional inequality. In Abani's version of Las Vegas, those in society's "core" – those closest to "hell" – are people who conduct nuclear testing, people who actively condone the testing or end up condoning it through disbelief in its continued presence, and people who perpetuate the

system of inequality resulting from the testing. The “periphery” contains those who have been affected physically by the nuclear testing and those who experience continued injustice as a result of this testing: ultimately, those “living and experiencing historical violence every day in the present” (Huehls 165). Fire and Water embody the Las Vegas “periphery’s” reclamation of power from a societal designation of powerlessness, especially through their reclamation of the derogatory term “freak.” In conversing with Sunil about growing up as part of a sideshow, Fire explains their self-identification as “freaks.” Fire starts:

We were downwinders, you know, downwind from the nuclear tests. She had leukemia, she was dying, so she gave us away and hanged herself.

Gave you away?

She gave us to Fred’s dad, Reverend Jacobs, and his freak show, the Lord’s Marvels.

Is that how you grew up? With a circus?

A sideshow, Doc, a sideshow. Not a circus. Yes, we grew up as freaks and hardcore downwinder nationalists. Sideshow or die, Fire said.

Why do you call yourselves freaks, Sunil asked.

It’s a badge of honor, Fire said. That’s what Reverend Jacobs gave us. Pride. You see, freaks are made, not born. Birth defects, unusual genetic formations, they make you less capable in this able-biased society, but they don’t make you a freak. Freakery you learn, you cultivate, you earn. (Abani 118-119)

When Fire talks of how “freaks are made, not born” and how “freakery you learn, you cultivate, you earn,” he begins to engage with the postcolonial carnivalesque power that his sideshow holds. Bakhtin’s carnivalesque theory emphasizes “the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the center” (Lachmann 116). By embracing their differences and finding pride in

them, the Downwinder Nation pulls even further away from the societal “core.” While those in power confine the people unequally impacted by nuclear testing to the “periphery” of society, Fire and Water’s sideshow community constructs a greater “peripheral” space for themselves through communal self-acceptance and celebration.

Fire goes on to differentiate circuses from sideshows and, in doing so, ultimately verbalizes the reality of a postcolonial carnivalesque space. Fire explains:

Circuses are about entertainment and juggling and animals and all that shit. Sideshows are about freaks, about people and the limits of acceptability. We push those limits. If a circus is an escape, Fire said, a sideshow is a confrontation.

I see, Sunil said, writing. And you feel empowered by this difference?

Damn fucking right we do, Fire said. (Abani 131)

According to Fire, a sideshow revolves around “the limits of acceptability” and “[pushing] those limits,” ultimately explaining how people on the “periphery” expand their realm through intentionally distancing themselves from “normative” culture in the “core” of societal “hell”(Abani 131). By designating a sideshow as a “confrontation,” Fire suggests that a community like this exists as a place necessitating acknowledgement of the inversion that characterizes it (Abani 131). A sideshow is a place where people come face to face with difference and the liberation that can stem from intentional resistance of norms. It is a place of organized “(dis)order” that counters oppressive “order” (Losambe 31). In the case of the Carnival of Lost Souls, these people establish organized “(dis)order” to resist not only the institutional inequality of the nuclear testing that physically marked all of them, but also to resist institutions in general.

In the setting of a sideshow, performance rules people's lives. Not only do these people perform as part of the Carnival of Lost Souls – which is a dramatization of their resistance – but also they actually perform the resistance in their daily lives. In a way, the sideshow performance becomes not merely an event but a lifeway, a transformation which is itself an inversion. The extent of Fire and Water's lifetime "performance" becomes clear nearing the end of the text, when Sunil realizes that Fire is brain dead. Talking to the twins, Sunil states:

It was bad enough that you were conjoined, but to have a parasitic, brain-dead, half-formed twin was worse, Sunil continued, ignoring Fred. So my guess is that you developed a way to make it appear as though Fire was alive. The bigger you made his character, the more believable he was. It's a very good plan, and I think you are very gifted. (Abani 284)

One of the major components of the twins' "act" is that Water has been carrying his brain-dead brother on his side for the entirety of his life, acting as a "ventriloquist" that animates Fire (Abani 285). This is perhaps the most shocking inversion within Abani's Las Vegas world. Throughout the text, Fire seems to be the "fiery" one, expressing the Downwinder Nation's commitment to resisting injustice they face at the hands of those with more societally-designated power.

When it becomes evident that it is really Water speaking, projecting his voice through the vessel that is Fire's mouth, questions arise regarding the resistance to which he is devoted. I found myself asking, "What does it mean for the brain dead twin to be the face of the resistance?" The "act" of Water giving life to his virtually lifeless twin actually strengthens his resistance. He gives a voice – and a very strong one, at that – to the voiceless. Fire serves as a

symbol of the resistance to the nuclear testing that physically disfigured an entire population of people.

Both *Beloved* and *Fire* are voiceless individuals, “killed” by their birth into oppressive historical moments. Morrison and Abani animate these two figures and place them at the heart of their texts, bestowing authority upon those who previously had none. In doing so, both authors not only “take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present,” but they also utilize the “unspoken” realities to encourage change (Daiya 149-150). It is this transformation upon which I focus in my final chapter.

Final Flames: The Freedom of Revolution

“In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.”

– Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His Worlds*

Mikhail Bakhtin’s assertion that the carnival does not “acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” provides insight into a subtle difference between not only *Beloved* and *Water* as carnival actors, but also between Morrison’s *Beloved* and Abani’s *The Secret History of Las Vegas* as postcolonial carnivalesque texts (Bakhtin 7). If the “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators,” then *The Secret History of Las Vegas* emerges as the postcolonial text with fully-formed carnivalesque agents, and *Beloved* exists as the postcolonial text with a character that exerts some carnivalesque influence without developing into a full carnivalesque agent (Bakhtin 7). By analyzing the endings of these texts, in which Morrison and Abani define the “actors” and “spectators” of their texts’ carnival action, it becomes evident that *The Secret History of Las Vegas* takes the postcolonial carnivalesque further than *Beloved* by blurring the lines between these two roles more explicitly, and this suggests that Abani expands upon Morrison’s literary form. The evolution of the postcolonial carnivalesque text from 1987 to 2014 can best be seen by comparing the final “revolutionary” scenes in *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas*.

When Denver leaves the house, she sets out to find work so that she can support her mother. She opens up to a woman named Janey Wagon, informing her about the situation developing between Sethe and *Beloved* at home. Denver exists as the primary “spectator” of *Beloved*’s carnival action. Morrison writes:

⁸ This quotation is from page 7 of Helene Iswolsky’s translation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1984).

The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other coloredwomen. Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair. It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through...It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order. (Morrison 300-301)

Because Denver embraces the necessity of assuming the role of an adult, leaving her home to find work, she reenters the community from which the 124 women were estranged. With her reentrance, the women in Sethe's community learn of Beloved's dangerous presence within the 124 household, and thirty of them organize themselves to rescue Sethe. They congregate outside Sethe's house and begin to sing. Morrison writes:

The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (Morrison 308)

Nearing the end of the "carnival (dis)order" of Morrison's *Beloved*, the women – the "spectators" – look towards Beloved – the "actor" who inverts Sethe's life – suggesting that the "actor" and the "spectators" exist separately in this text (Losambe 31). However, the women's perception of Beloved not only reflects the inverted nature of her presence but also suggests their

engagement with her carnival influence. They refer to her as a “devil-child,” yet they do not fear her (Morrison 308). Instead, they find her to be beautiful in her pregnant form. As I mention in the previous chapter, Denver expresses that as a result of the indoor “celebration” that Beloved inspires in 124 Bluestone Road, “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother,” rather than the child (Morrison 295). In the above passage from page 308 of the text, Beloved fully embodies this role-reversal, no longer just “[looking] the mother,” but now actually taking the form of an expecting mother (Morrison 295). And, like in other segments of this analysis, Beloved continues to smile her “dazzling” smile, especially menacing now that readers know how much power she can exert over Sethe (Morrison 308). This contradiction between the women’s recognition of the “devilish” nature of Beloved and their momentary awe for her beauty depicts Beloved’s power of luring others into her “carnival.” In this moment, the “spectating” community inches closer to Beloved’s “action.”

In my previous chapter, I discuss how Beloved’s presence causes Sethe to morph with her, so much so that “it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who” (Morrison 283). In the months that Sethe shuts herself in her home with Beloved – engaging in a relationship built on excessive emotion and inverted action – the two become indistinguishable. The indoor carnival Beloved creates momentarily “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” as Beloved and Sethe become one entity (Bakhtin 7). However, this melding of roles does not last in this form. In the same scene as the above passage, Sethe moves from her position beside Beloved to her position within the community of women:

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. (Morrison 309)

Leaving Beloved's side, Sethe detaches herself from the smiling carnival character, increasing the distance between "actor" and "spectator." By moving away from Beloved and towards her fellow female community members, Sethe removes herself from the carnival inversion Beloved creates and joins the communal "spectators." It is interesting to think about Sethe's movement, separating herself from one figure to join a group, in conjunction with the critical work of Mary Jane Suero Elliott (2000). She emphasizes the power of the collective in "decolonizing" and redefining the self (Suero Elliott). Sethe ultimately reclaims authority over herself by turning outward to her community rather than inward towards the consuming pain of her past that is contained within the form of Beloved.

As a result, Beloved and her carnival influence physically disappear, leaving only footprints in her wake. Morrison explains, "Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there" (Morrison 324). Even though Sethe physically detaches herself from Beloved, she carries the transformation inspired by Beloved's action with her when she enters her community. The fact that other community members' feet fit in Beloved's footprints illustrates that Beloved's influence bleeds into the community. Despite the fact that Beloved loses her bodily form, her essence remains. The persistence of her influence can be seen in the "[coming] and [going]" of her footprints (Morrison 324).

Beloved has carnival influence in that she causes disruption, but her physical disappearance reveals that her disruption does not lead to her own permanent reclamation of

power. The role-reversal of mother and child that occurs between Sethe and Beloved – which I discuss in my chapter “Carrying the Weight of the Dead in Life: Trauma that Haunts” – exists as the epitome of that which I believe Beloved hopes to accomplish by returning to the world of the living. She exerts power over the woman who took her life by claiming a mother’s role of authority over her. As Morrison writes, “Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (Morrison 295). This “mother-daughter” relationship is not one of protection. Instead, it is a threatening relationship that holds Sethe hostage with the constant reminder of her painful past that drove her to consider death the ultimate safety for her child. Because of this, I realize that Beloved’s pain is Sethe’s pain. The line between “actor” and “spectator” once again blurs as Beloved’s actions lead to Sethe’s revitalization. I interpret this to mean that Sethe is not ready to instigate her own resistance against her painful past. She needs a push, and what better push is there than to have the manifestation of that pain return to haunt her in the flesh? Beloved’s reappearance in Sethe’s life represents Sethe’s confrontation of the ways her experiences in slavery scarred her, and her physical disappearance, therefore, represents Sethe’s initial attempts at moving forward from this pain. Forgetting, however, is not a component of Sethe’s healing. So, even though Beloved no longer lives as a “being” in the community, all that she represents – for Sethe and others – lives on in communal memory.

While Beloved disappears prior to witnessing the communal effects of her disruptive presence, Water remains to watch the final “show” of his lifetime “performance” of disruption at the end of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. Readers finally find out what it is that members of the Downwinder Nation do to resist institutional power. In response to Sunil’s questioning of Water and Fred, they explain, “We are committed to the eradication of dangerous military

research in Nevada, Arizona, and Utah. We find ways to close down facilities engaged in such research” (Abani 287). Shortly after, Abani narrates:

[Water] let himself out with Brewster’s key and headed to the elevator, which he rode down to the hidden labs in the basement, the ones he knew Sunil had never seen.

Selecting one that seemed right in the middle, he gathered all the tanks labeled FLAMMABLE into a pile. Next he took out the cell phone that Fred had given him. He pushed the buttons in sequence and the countdown began. He had five minutes to get out. Best to go, he thought, placing the phone in the middle of the pile of tanks. He took off at a fast trot, and three minutes and fifty seconds later he was out the back door, past the loading dock, and into Fred’s car. (Abani 304)

To be rid of the institute central to *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, the Downwinder Nation plots to send it up in flames from the inside, with Water acting as the source of this fire, much like Water acts as the source of vitality for his brain-dead conjoined twin Fire.

Once Water escapes from the building and joins Fred, they drive off to watch the “grand finale” of the “show” they put on. Abani writes:

They laughed, and Fred gunned the engine some more, pushing the car even faster. Then she pulled off the road into a strip mall that afforded a perfect view of the institute from its lot, parking right next to the black SUV that held the midgets. They all got out and sat on the roof of the SUV. Fred glanced at her watch.

Not bad, she said, we have ten seconds to spare.

In exactly ten seconds, the institute went up in a ball of fire. It was spectacular, as though the old days of the bomb tests were back. Flames and smoke in a big plume that rose over

a hundred feet into the sky, throwing debris everywhere, showering the parking lot of the strip mall with ash. (Abani 305)

In this moment, it becomes clear that the members of the Downwinder Nation exist as both the “actors” and the “spectators” of their acts of resistance, just as Mikhail Bakhtin says will be the case within a literary carnival. Within this context especially, this melding of roles grants these figures even more power because it allows them to invert the scene in the text that represents the ultimate societal inequality against which they fight.

In my chapter “Carrying the Weight of the Dead in Life: Trauma that Haunts,” I discuss how in the 1950s, people in Las Vegas “[watched] the mushroom clouds” of nuclear bombs, which the “U.S. government set off,” like fireworks (Abani 56). People would “watch the explosions while sipping on a cocktail” as if this government activity that poisoned many people was a cause for celebration (Abani 56). The inversion of this scene goes beyond mere role-reversal. Abani’s characters not only take the place of the 1950s spectators, but they also reconfigure the context from which they view their act’s “finale.” The members of the Downwinder Nation do not spectate from an “elegant” locale, sipping cocktails. Rather, they watch from a strip mall parking lot. By setting fire to the institute and watching it explode into flames – recreating an event which harmed them while completely inverting it by watching from an opposite location – these members of the Downwinder Nation make this act their own and reclaim authority that those in society’s hellish “core” stripped from them.

These figures, while present to witness the final result of their disruptive action, ultimately disappear in the end too. After the show of flames and ash concludes, Water wonders where they will go next. The figures of the Downwinder Nation leave the text with this conversation:

Spectacular work, Fred said.

Water turned and kissed her deeply.

Where now, he said.

The desert for a while. The carnival has already moved on. We'll catch up later.

And like that, Fred, Fire, Water, and the fighting midgets were gone. (Abani 306)

This disappearance differs from that of *Beloved* because it suggests that in moving on, Abani's figures are bound to repeat their actions elsewhere. However, even though *Beloved* and *Water* disappear in different manners following their disruption, they both leave behind them transformed communities. Their disappearances do not signify the end of their carnivalesque influences. In my conclusion that follows, I discuss my interpretation of how the characters' "preparation" for their acts of resistance within these two texts exists as the main factor positioning *The Secret History of Las Vegas* as a continuation of *Beloved*.

Conclusion

Francesca Giommi (2011) writes that Chris Abani's "work can be read as a lasting tribute to the triumph of the human spirit... and – on a wider level – of belonging, freedom, and humanity" (Giommi 183). By reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in conjunction with Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* in this critical analysis, I understand the work of both Morrison and Abani to revolve around the development of a sense of "belonging, freedom, and humanity" through the inverted, disruptive action these authors employ.

In concluding my joint theoretical consideration of *Beloved* and *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, I propose that overlaps in my analysis illustrate that Morrison and Abani ultimately rely upon the carnivalesque in similar ways, but they employ this resistant, inverted action for people in different stages of their processes of confronting past trauma.

Focusing upon the moments in which *Beloved* and *Water* disrupt the "order" within their respective texts leads me to realize that carnival action can take different forms within the realm of postcolonial literature, depending upon how ready to confront and resist past trauma individuals feel. Sethe just begins to confront her own painful history once *Beloved* returns during the text of *Beloved*. Because she has not acknowledged and processed her pain yet, she cannot exist as her own primary agent of resistance to trauma. Instead, *Beloved* serves as the figure who instigates Sethe's revitalization. On the other hand, *Water* lives as part of a radical group that systematically confronts government organization after government organization like the one that poisoned him. Growing up as part of a sideshow – where the concept of confrontation is central – *Water* already confronted his traumatic past long before the present of the text of *The Secret History of Las Vegas*. He is more than prepared for the repeated shows of resistance in which he takes part with his fellow Downwinder Nation members.

Focusing on the carnivalesque inversions within Morrison's text reveals the process through which Sethe takes her initial step towards revitalization, while focusing on the carnivalesque inversions within Abani's text reveals the truly revolutionary state of revitalization in which Water resides after allowing for adequate confrontation of past trauma over time. The "degree" of revitalization develops over both the time that the characters spend confronting their pasts within these texts as well as the time between the texts' publications. In this way, the state of the carnival in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* exists as a precursor to that in Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas*.

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