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Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Plantations, Pedagogy and the Future of Digital Slavery

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Abstract: *For scholars who study the history of slavery in the United States, the claim that slave plantations functioned like schools is controversial but hardly original. However, it can be challenging to find a similar level of interest, inquiry, or evidence to corroborate this claim in the scholarship and textbooks of many contemporary historians in the field of education. As such, the pedagogical effects of slavery are often underrepresented and the slave plantation as a formal and informal pedagogical space is undertheorized. Understanding the various institutions and environments that contribute to the development of teaching and learning remains important, particularly for those who write, study, or teach the history of American education and those who use digital platforms or cloud-based learning management systems such as Google Classroom. To encourage a more interdisciplinary approach to the history of education in the United States and elsewhere, some historians have recommended the novels and musings of writers such as Toni Morrison. This study uses a semiotic approach to reveal what one can learn when Morrison's* Beloved *is revisited and mapped to illuminate its theoretical and pedagogical import for interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners in many fields, particularly education. As the slave master and pedagogue on the Sweet Home slave plantation, the character Schoolteacher develops a pedagogy for his pupil-nephews and pupil-slaves that is not too distant from the data extraction protocols used by many internet corporations and the academic systems that employ their digital services and infrastructure to facilitate and measure teaching and learning. The findings suggest that Morrison's novel is an interdisciplinary tool that enriches one's understanding of American literature and history while illuminating data extraction as a colonial and pedagogical imperative that informs slavery in the past and education in the digital future.*

Keywords: Data colonialism; digital slavery; history; literature; teacher education

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Toni Morrison's (2004) *Beloved* offers educators and others a thought-provoking commentary on the depravity of slavery as well as the role slave plantations and pedagogy played in its substantiation and afterlife in the history of American education. More specifically, this article claims that the slave plantation may need

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to be reconsidered as a pivotal site in one's understanding of the development of pedagogy and mass education in the United States (Cremin, 1980; Marquez, 2024; McKittrick, 2013; Phillips, 2007; Rosenthal, 2021, Snyder, 2007; Warren, 2005; Webber, 1978). Several scholars and practitioners in the field of education may disagree. Many educationists might see limited value in investigating the ways Morrison's novel advances our understanding of the slave plantation as a formal and informal pedagogical space. However, one must remember that Morrison was a prolific author and educator whose novels exhibit cross-disciplinary appeal and significance. Furthermore, scholarship suggests that *Beloved* offers significant insights about complex social, economic, and technological phenomena that cross many areas of study, including literature, history, and education (Balfour, 2023; Egnal, 2024; Elia, 2024; Fox, 2025; Litten, 2024; Seward & Tally, 2014; Tally, 2008). For example, the main character in Morrison's (2004) novel is a runaway slave named Sethe, whose depiction is inspired by the life of a woman named Margaret Garner. The novel unfolds around Sethe's decision to kill her children rather than see them returned to a lifetime of enslavement on the Sweet Home slave plantation. When the slave master, also known as Schoolteacher, arrived to return Sethe and her children to Sweet Home, Sethe tried to kill them to prevent their enslavement. However, Sethe succeeded in killing only one of her offspring, Beloved. She stated, "I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out" (Morrison, 2004, p. 192). Ironically, Beloved returned in the form of a ghost-like figure to haunt Sethe's household and indict slavery as a capitalist imperative and pedagogical principle that inspires the abuse of power, corrupts social relations, and erodes black humanity in the extraction and monetization of black labor (Morrison, 2004; Ng, 2011). Reflecting on the development of Sethe's predicament, Morrison (2020) stated, "I wanted her to actually sit down at the table with the things she's been trying to avoid and explain away, which is this past, this terrible thing that happened, to confront it. As a way of saying that's what the past is. It's a living thing" (p. 25).

As Sethe confronted the past as a living thing, she contemplated the roles that Schoolteacher and slavery play as external catalysts for her horrific decision. Unlike Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the original owners of the Sweet Home slave plantation, Schoolteacher's rule over his white pupil-nephews and black pupil-slaves is co-extensive, positivistic, and often cruel—prompting Sethe and male slaves such as Halle, Paul D, and Sixo, also known as the Sweet Home men, to seek escape from the physical control and psychic authority that Schoolteacher and the plantation symbolize in the novel. On the plantation, Schoolteacher behaved like a technician and the slaves were considered chattel for his observations, recordkeeping, and categorizations (Edgerton, 1993; Searls, 1997). The impact of Schoolteacher's instruction is "the perpetuation and refinement of a status quo in which he and others of his class possess and exercise power." His scientific approach to education, management, and violence are central to his characterization as "an emotionless, puritanical slave master who consciously deploys education as a tool to shape those he teaches to his own ends" (Milligan, 1999, p. 369). Morrison's (2004) work challenges the asymmetrical relations of power at the heart of the master–slave binary and its corrosive effect on one's mind and habits. "The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable," she argued, "but equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind,

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imagination, and behavior of masters" (as cited in Elia, 2024, p. 15). The fact that Morrison (2004) formulated the slave master and teacher as one and the same entity encourages more scholars to attend to the ways slave plantations signify as spaces for exercising pedagogy and power over enslaved people whose experiences and labor could be calibrated, extracted, and turned into data and profits in the name of education (Baptist, 2014; Benjamin, 2019b; Gilbert, 2024; Zuboff, 2019). For example, Schoolteacher attempted to exhaust his pupil-slaves as a source of data that also served as content for advancing his pupil-nephews' education. In many ways, his pedagogical tactics and practices are not too distant from the data extraction protocols used by many internet corporations such as Google and the academic systems that employ their platforms to facilitate teaching and learning (Chisnall, 2020; Levine, 2018; Sefton-Green, 2022; Williamson et al., 2020). With this fundamental similarity in mind, scholars and practitioners in education and beyond might be more inclined to investigate the significance of slavery and slave plantations in the history of American education. Also, more studies are needed to assess and explain how Morrison's *Beloved* might enrich one's understanding of data extraction and its colonial and pedagogical implications in the digital age (Chisnall, 2020; Litten, 2024; Mejias & Couldry, 2024; Revelles-Benavente, 2014; Seward & Tally, 2014). With that said, Morrison's musings on slavery and plantations in *Beloved* may need to be revisited and mapped to illuminate their theoretical appeal and pedagogical import for advancing interdisciplinary practices in literature, history, and especially education. In doing so, one discovers that disciplines—like novels—interweave despite the agents, boundaries, and worldviews that operate to keep them separated.

Contextualizing the Problem

Diverse scholars worldwide have evaluated *Beloved*. However, they tend to use the novel to address ways to teach difficult histories about racism, examine slavery and freedom, or expand our understanding of the role of politics and racial identity in society (Balfour, 2023; Fox, 2025; Litten, 2024; Ng, 2011; Tally, 2008). Nardi (2022) would agree that such considerations often provide limited insights into the role that Morrison's characterization of the Sweet Home slave plantation plays as a pedagogical context or space sustained by the extraction, inscription, and commodification of black experiences, flesh, and labor in the name of education. For example, Ng (2011) argued that space is an important feature in *Beloved*. He claimed, "As much as space functions metaphorically in the narrative, it is also undeniable that space, especially place, is also a literal, material, and geographical reality which carries social and psychological significances" (p. 231). To examine the significance of trauma and space in the novel, he focused on 124 Bluestone, the place that Sethe and her family called home after escaping slavery. However, the source of the trauma that the main characters experience living at 124 Bluestone originates on the Sweet Home slave plantation, where they were enslaved under the rule and pedagogy of Schoolteacher. In the academic literature on the history of education, one finds limited studies whose authors engage the slave plantation—real or imagined—as an important pedagogical space in the history of American education. Warren (2005) claimed that "most historians of education have not considered the institution of slavery to be one of their topics" (p. 43). He cited Webber (1978) and Cremin (1980) as notable

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authorities who have explored the significance of the slave plantation as a space for pedagogy and education (also see Lascarides & Hinitz, 2011; Marquez, 2024; Phillips, 2007; Urban et al., 2019; Williams, 2005). These two historians have helped readers to understand the things slave masters wanted their slaves to learn and the methods used to achieve such goals. However, it can be challenging to find this level of consideration in more contemporary texts that examine the history of higher education in the United States (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Cohen & Kisker, 2024; Dorn, 2022; Gasman, 2010; Geiger, 2015; Thelin, 2019). A similar challenge is evident in many studies and textbooks on the history of primary and secondary education (Fraser, 2019; Goldstein, 2015; Neem, 2017; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2013; Stein, 2022). Moreover, considerations of the slave plantation as a pedagogical space are often underexplored by writers who examine the history and politics of black education in the United States (J. Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2021; Green, 2016; Kelly & Roberson, 2023; King, 2005; Perkins, 2024; Watkins, 2001). However, Wilder (2013) and others have indicated that academic institutions do not stand apart from slavery and its contextualization (Gutek, 2022; Malott, 2021). In his study, Warren (2005) reported, "The master–slave relation gave impetus, contour, organization, and curriculum to an otherwise diverse institution that functioned recognizably as a kind of antebellum common school for the South" (p. 47). On a similar note, Rosenthal's (2021) examination of the origins of modern accounting practices revealed that several slaveholders were keenly interested in education and actively pursued it. Like Schoolteacher in Morrison's novel, many slaveholders maintained meticulous records on their observations and property holdings, which included enslaved people. Some also published textbooks and manuals on plantation management and accounting. Rosenthal (2021) claimed, "while cotton and sugar planters sent their sons north to New England and across the Atlantic to Europe to be educated, other merchants and tradesmen sent their sons to the West Indies for practical experience working as bookkeepers and agents on large slave plantations" (p. 467).

The preceding review suggests one may have to search across the disciplines to discover other instances that illustrate how plantation practices often align with pedagogy or the theory and practice of teaching for a particular learning outcome or goal (Hinchliffe, 2001; Schick & Timperley, 2022). Scholars in areas such as medical science, religious studies, technology studies, and management studies reveal how the plantation served as an open-air factory and de facto laboratory for scientific experimentation as well as physical torture and behavior modification. It was also a space for a wide array of formal and informal modes of teaching and learning that many educators today would recognize as early imprints for understanding tutoring, mentoring, internships, early childhood education, medical education, and vocational education (Baptist, 2014; Butler, 2023; Cooke, 2003; Dudley, 2012; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2011; Phillips, 2007; Rosenthal, 2018; Schiebinger, 2017; Snyder, 2007; Sullivan, 2010; Willoughby, 2022; Yetman, 2000). More specifically, scholars in American history such as Egnal (2024) have turned to literature and the writings of authors such as Morrison (2004) to reveal how fictional works can illuminate areas of American history that scholars consciously or unconsciously underplay or ignore in other academic areas. For several scholars, particularly in fields such as literature, novelists provide the kind of insight and guidance that can serve as a mirror for understanding history and education. For example, novelists help illuminate the

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links between the real and the imagined and the social and historical conditions that enrich investigations and explanations of the living past (Baptist, 2014; Blassingame, 1979; Dennis, 2024a; Egnal, 2024; Warren, 2005). This approach often challenges the quantitative focus valued by many scholars in education and scientific disciplines that rarely privilege fictional characters or texts as a source of scholarly inquiry. However, Morrison's (2004) fictional depictions of slave masters and their slaves are not too distant from their real-life counterparts. In the studies of Baptist (2014) and Yetman (2000), readers are introduced to slave masters and mistresses such as John Breckinridge, Billy Boone, and Sam and Evaline Brodie. Readers are also introduced to slaves and ex-slaves such as Charles Ball, Andrew Boone, Frederick Douglass, and Alfred and Bertha Brodie. In this sense, the world that Morrison formulates in *Beloved* is just as consequential as any cultural artifact or event studied in a history text. Egnal (2024) also suggested that Morrison's novel signals a break with the presuppositions and prerogatives associated with disciplinarity, positivism, and modernism in American intellectual culture and institutions. It introduces ghosts, fractured notions of space and time, and troubling complexities that encourage interdisciplinary conversations about what it means to be an African American living in a social system conditioned by slavery and *anti-blackness*. This term describes the collected prejudices, aversions, and discriminatory practices often associated with the oppression, subjugation, and marginalization of people of African descent in the United States (Dumas, 2016; W. Johnson, 2020). Therefore, the terms *black* and *white* are used in lowercase in this study to account for their social construction and shifting signification in past and present social and institutional spaces, including slave plantations (Cox, 1970; DuBois, 1998; Morrison, 2020).

For some scholars, slave plantations provide a dynamic history for understanding oppression in analog and digital spaces and how plantation-based systems of power and surveillance mirror the organization of American culture at-large (Ajunwa, 2023; Benjamin, 2019a; Caison et al., 2021; Foster et al., 2020; W. Johnson, 2020). The term *plantation* is used to describe a farm or large estate located in climates conducive to the production and sustainability of cash crops and goods that might include tobacco, cotton, or sugar. These items were typically cultivated by indentured servants and chattel slaves with a range of duties and skills calibrated and managed by a system of punishments to induce productivity, efficiency, and capital gains for enslavers and their creditors. People of African descent were often perceived as a more reliable source of labor for plantations than the white indentured servants used before the arrival of blacks en masse in the colonies. Morgan (2003) claimed that many slave masters "converted to slavery simply by buying slaves instead of servants" (p. 297). He also reported that there was often little difference in the ways that masters perceived and treated servants and slaves. In many instances, "Black men and white serving the same master worked, ate, and slept together, and together shared in spades, escapes, and punishments" (p. 155). As such, Morgan might agree that "in the early decades of the seventeenth century there were few marked differences in the conception of black and white servitude, the terms 'slave' and 'servant' being used synonymously." In fact, the power of "the master over both black and white servants was near total: both could be whipped and sold" (Patterson, 2018, pp. 6–7). The importation of slaves from Africa helped slave owners meet the labor demands of plantation

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life. As a result, slavery's vast scale and scope influenced nearly every aspect of the economy, politics, and regional identities and interests of an emerging United States (Baptist, 2014; Genovese, 1976; Morrison, 2020). However, unlike indentured servitude, chattel slavery involves one person owning another human for life and as an asset or commodity that could be traded and sold across space and time, particularly as slavery was increasingly rationalized using racial categories that typically situated black people at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Western thought. In many cases, chattel slavery proliferated when space and opportunities for profit were more abundant than the unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled labor necessary for the operation of plantations (Genovese, 1976; Morgan, 2003; Patterson, 2018). In her groundbreaking study on slave plantations, McKittrick (2013) argued that "a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially" (p. 3). The slave plantation generated wealth and dispossession among the unfree and indentured that has lingered long after emancipation. McKittrick claimed, "It is through the violence of slavery, then, that the plantation produces black rootedness in place precisely because the land becomes the key provision through which black people could both survive and be forced to fuel the plantation machine" (p. 11). McKittrick's assessment helps readers understand how the interdisciplinary character and logic of the slave plantation link to the broader economy and current realities, including impoverished cities populated by blacks, prisons for the mass incarceration of blacks, and neglected or underperforming schools and classrooms where they are too often ill-educated and differentiated by ability tracking. This kind of insight has led McKittrick (2013) to ask, "What if we acknowledged that the plantation is, as Toni Morrison writes, a space that everybody runs from but nobody stops talking about, and thus that it is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our present spatial organization that holds in it a new future?" (p. 10). However, her question might also inspire one to ask, what are the ways a reconsideration of the term *pedagogy* and Morrison's *Beloved* enrich and advance one's understanding of the slave plantation as a microcosm and significant interdisciplinary context or space for teaching and learning in the history of American education?

Pedagogy as Conceptual Framework

To explore the preceding question, I introduce a semiotic conceptualization of pedagogy as a framework for examining the relevance of the Sweet Home slave plantation as a pedagogical space and Schoolteacher's role and relations as a pedagogue in this context. A semiotic understanding of pedagogy can help novice and seasoned educators make "sense of the mechanisms by which social control and social reproduction occur through everyday interactions," transforming pedagogy into a form of interdisciplinary theory that is inherently semiological (Sefton-Green, 2022, p. 902). More specifically, this study will use a semiotic approach to illuminate and investigate the elements in Morrison's *Beloved* that can help scholars and practitioners in education and beyond understand why the slave plantation as an ethos and space should be considered a pivotal site of formal and informal modes of pedagogy in the appreciations of those who write, study, or teach the history of education in the United States. In doing so, scholars and practitioners learn how the pedagogization of enslaved black people is used as a disciplinary principle to control the production of knowledge and labor.

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Also, imagining pedagogy as a semiotic practice reveals how Morrison's novel supports the Greek use of *pedagogy* to describe a master or slave who instructs, guides, or supervises the actions of others, developing in individuals those qualities, discourses, and behaviors suitable for their particular social and economic roles (Givens, 2021). This insight suggests that the relationship between pedagogy and education is complementary. They are often used interchangeably in academic institutions. However, many scholars have claimed that there is little consensus across the disciplines in terms of a coherent description of what pedagogy and education represent and entail (Gibbs, 2021; Hinchliffe, 2001; Labaree, 2008; Zimmerman, 2020). The possibility of their inexplicability among scholars and professional educators could mean that the experiences of many millions of people might be going unexplained unless scholars and practitioners can provide a good account of what pedagogy and education are and what they achieve (Gibbs, 2021). Therefore, I refer to *education* to describe the amalgamation of the cultural values, sensibilities, knowledge, skills, theories, and pedagogical methods and tactics used by various agents, individuals, or groups—consciously or unconsciously—to realize the purpose and goals of teaching and learning in a particular context or space (Hinchliffe, 2001; Webber, 1978).

However, my understanding of pedagogy in this study is informed by Bernstein's (2000) characterization of the concept as a discursive practice between transmitters (teachers) and acquirers (students) in formal and informal contexts or spaces. He argued that pedagogy is a sustained process "whereby somebody(s) acquires new forms or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice and criteria from somebody(s) or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator—appropriate either from the point of view of the acquirer or by some other body(s) or both" (p. 78). The process of learning occurs in the interplay, exchanges, and reciprocity between transmitters and acquirers. Bernstein (2000) also described the different environments in which transmitters and acquirers interact. They include institutional or *formal* pedagogical spaces and segmented or *informal* pedagogical spaces. Institutional pedagogical spaces might include formal or traditional settings such as academic and religious institutions or professional programs and organizations where an accredited transmitter or teacher offers opportunities for teaching and learning to acquirers or students assembled voluntarily or involuntarily as a group or social entity. Segmented pedagogical spaces can include a range of informal settings such as community centers, training facilities, farms, workplaces, or households in which the transmitter may not necessarily be an accredited figure but one who possesses an authority that those assembled voluntarily or involuntarily consider valuable or necessary. Unlike many informal organizations, accredited academic institutions are typically part of existing school systems that are expected to fulfill the goals and prerogatives of the state (Bernstein, 2000; Merriam & Brockett, 2007). According to Schick and Timperley (2022), "As scholars and educators, we often take for granted that pedagogy happens in particular locations, and regularly assume that these locations are classrooms on university campuses" (p. 6). However, digital technology relocates pedagogy across space and time, highlighting the fact that it routinely happens in both intentional and unintentional ways and often in spaces outside the traditional classroom—where many people actually train and prepare for their roles in the workforce. In this study, I refer to *pedagogical*

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space to recognize the ubiquitous nature of teaching and learning and how technology—as a term used to describe an idea, tool, or computerized device—expands opportunities and transforms the contexts or spaces in which they are instrumentalized (M. Anderson, 2024; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Vigil, 2022). The concept also accounts for the different theories and practices operationalized in different environments, including the various methods, strategies, technologies, and signs that facilitate pedagogical relations between transmitters and acquirers (Bernstein, 2000; Vigil, 2022).

Unlike scholars such as Bernstein (2000), I characterize the fundamental logic that governs pedagogy and pedagogical spaces as an inherently semiotic process that translates and expresses power. The term *semiotics* or semiology is broadly defined as the interpretation and study of signs and their communicative processes and meanings in different contexts. It reinforces a pluralistic and dialogic approach for teaching in analog or digital settings. *Interdisciplinarity* is one of the ways semiotics is expressed and practiced in formal and informal pedagogical contexts or spaces. It represents a form of dialogue between two or more disciplines to enrich teaching, learning, and research (Stables & Semetsky, 2015). In many ways, Bernstein's writings support a semiotic understanding of pedagogy and power. Based on his evaluation of Bernstein's theories, Sefton-Green (2022) reported that "pedagogy describes a form of power above and beyond pedagogical theories which relate more narrowly to the relationship between how teachers teach and how pupils learn" (p. 902). Power conditions the relations between transmitters and acquirers in the production and reproduction of meaning, knowledge, and learning. It always operates to "produce dislocations, to produce punctuations in social space" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 5). Based on one's circumstances and relation to power, one is always moving in and out of different pedagogical relations in social spaces. In short, the management and organization of pedagogy and space often reflect the circulation of power evident in the larger society, which seems to suggest that space is fundamental to the exercise of pedagogy and power (M. Anderson, 2024; Gulson & Symes, 2007). For example, relations of power inspire the creation, legitimation, and regulation of the spaces, boundaries, and categories used to manage or control groups, gender, class, race, and discourse (Bernstein, 2000; Sefton-Green, 2022). In this case, *discourse* is used to describe visual imagery and sound as well as written and spoken texts. A text represents the smallest unit of practice in pedagogical relations. However, texts and textuality produce *signification* or the incessant play of signs in the construction and representation of meaning (Bankov, 2022; Stables & Semetsky, 2015). Therefore, education and pedagogical relations are always susceptible to the play of difference in meanings and agents that attempt to *en-close* and *fore-close* this play and the opportunities it creates for disrupting and transfiguring the status quo. In this sense, education and pedagogy can be understood as a form of discourse, texts, or *semiotics* (Bernstein, 2000; Stables & Semetsky, 2015; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Semiotics characterizes the ways in which these discursive processes translate meaning between learners and the learned. Trifonas (2003) reported, "In relation to pedagogy, the distinguishing characteristic of the scene of teaching would be an exchange of signs," which involves a *semio-scriptology* or the play of differences in writing and signification (p. 225). A semiotic conceptualization of pedagogy also means that the exchanges and reciprocity between transmitters and acquirers often entail some mode of

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transformation in the form of extraction, translation, and inscription or *writing* (Biesta, 2009). Writing is constituted as a chain of signification that depends on the simultaneity among signifier, signified, and referent. Lash (1990) argued, "Here the signifier is a sound, image, word or statement; the signified is a concept or meaning; and the referent is an object in the real world to which signifier and signified connect" (p. 5).

As a system of signs, writing is also a form of interdisciplinary communication that facilitates teaching and learning. It expresses power when we use it to *discipline* or circumscribe fields of knowledge and what can and cannot be represented or said in certain contexts or spaces. According to Foucault (1995) discipline is a principle of control that sometimes requires enclosure or a "protected place of disciplinary monotony" (p. 141). In this sense, it produces carcerality or a social system in which discourses, architecture, space, and coercive regulations are integrated to respond to perceived delinquency or deviations from a particular set of norms established by agents of power (Benjamin, 2019a; Foucault, 1995). Based on Foucault's logic, carceral spaces and their disciplinary capacities for controlling mind and body can be evidenced in asylums, prisons, labor camps, plantations, and schools. These institutions instill docility in individuals while increasing their utility. As such, discipline and its normalizing power are embedded in their purpose and architecture. Foucault (1995) claimed, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 170). More significantly, he also added, "A 'power of writing' was constituted as an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline. On many points, it was modelled on the traditional methods of administrative documentation, though with particular techniques and important innovations. Some concerned methods of identification, signalling or description" (p. 189). Documentary techniques associated with the power to discipline transform humans and their lives into texts for subjection, classification, and quantification. Therefore, the technologies and surveillance strategies associated with writing, notations, and the arrangement of facts in columns and tables permit the extraction, collection, and commodification of knowledge or labor in formal pedagogical spaces such as schools as well as (in)formal pedagogical spaces such as plantations designed for the control of servants or slaves (Foucault, 1995; McKittrick, 2013; Webber, 1978). To illustrate how these documentary techniques operate and how semiotic pedagogical relations and spaces connect the pupil-slaves and pupil-nephews on the Sweet Home slave plantation, one must examine the nature of their instruction under the control of Schoolteacher in Morrison's novel. With this in mind, I will explore how the Sweet Home slave planation functions as a pedagogical space where Schoolteacher's instruction as a slave master is designed to control his pupil-slaves and the signification associated with their discourse and actions. Then I describe how Schoolteacher's practices as a pedagogue for his pupil-nephews are underwritten by an anti-black ethos and data extraction protocols that produce knowledge procured from his pupil-slaves. Finally, I reveal why Schoolteacher's pedagogy is not too distant from the data extraction protocols used by many internet corporations and the digital platforms and cloud-based learning management systems increasingly used in many academic institutions. This evidence suggests that slavery and slave plantations played a significant role in the history of American education. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach and tools may be needed to

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enrich teaching, learning, and research in education and other academic contexts or spaces in the future.

Sweet Home as Pedagogical Space

As a pedagogical space, the Sweet Home slave plantation serves as the context for highlighting a social relationship in which Schoolteacher operates as the transmitter and his pupil-slaves must adapt to their roles as acquirers after the passing of Mr. Garner. Unlike Schoolteacher, Mr. Garner made Sweet Home a place that was bearable for Sethe, her family members, and the Sweet Home men who lived and labored there. It was once a safe place where the male slaves felt that they were treated as men, carrying guns and even defying Mr. Garner, if necessary. In fact, Mr. Garner thought "what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves' opinions did not deprive him of authority or power. It was Schoolteacher who taught them otherwise" (Morrison, 2004, p. 147). Schoolteacher arrived to put things in order, thus shattering the illusion of Sweet Home and intensifying it as a carceral space in which some learn and others labor under duress. Described as a little man who wore spectacles and talked softly while watching hard, Schoolteacher transformed Sweet Home into a space for producing goods as well as knowledge through the pedagogical social bond created between master and pupil. For example, Schoolteacher made his pupil-nephews "sit and learn books for a spell every afternoon. If it was nice enough weather, they'd sit on the side of the porch. All three of em. He'd talk and they'd write. Or he would read and they would write down what he said" (Morrison, 2004, p. 227). This particular image in Morrison's novel reveals the change in "the meaning of 'master' as 'a man having control or authority'" to that of a teacher or a person qualified to instruct. This semiology reflects "the ease with which it is possible to shift from our conception of the slave plantation as a brutal system of exploitation and human degradation to a pastoral college for the edification of poor savages eager to learn the superior arts of the civilized 'master'" (Patterson, 2018, p. 335).

However, Schoolteacher denied his pupil-slaves the same academic privileges that his pupil-nephews received on the plantation. In fact, the pupil-slaves were perceived as workhorses whose "neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke" (p. 148). In many ways, Schoolteacher's pedagogical approach for his pupil-slaves helps one to understand why some scholars have noted that mandatory laws that prohibited slaves from learning to read and write supported the rise of chattel slavery in the United States (Blassingame, 1979; Genovese, 1976; Givens, 2021; Phillips, 2007). For centuries, many African Americans were denied opportunities to read and write as a condition conducive to the maintenance of slavery and the carceral order it required, particularly on plantations. In his study, J. Anderson (1988) recognized the symbiosis between educational thought and the politics of oppression in American democracy. He reported, "Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education" (p. 1). These were not opposing traditions or spaces for J. Anderson, but a reflection of the legacy and long struggle between two systems: one that values slavery and peasantry and another that values capitalism and free labor (Malott, 2021; Webber, 1978). To dissociate

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the two, particularly in *Beloved*, disregards the ways that Morrison emphasized "the primacy of the pedagogical in her literary and critical writings, drawing attention to the ways in which knowledge, power, and identities are produced under specific conditions of learning within the academy and outside of it" (Searls, 1997, p. 154). The goal was to keep enslaved people such as Sethe and the Sweet Home men disenfranchised to reduce the threats that *educated slaves* posed to the authority of slave masters and the capitalist imperatives of the time. To protect the status quo, Schoolteacher and other plantation owners restricted opportunities for slaves that might have been detrimental to their interests and financial security. Therefore, violence, torture, and other disciplinary tools and tactics allowed slave masters to remain as dominant on plantations as their finances or fears dictated (Morrison, 2020; Phillips, 2007).

For instance, if they survived, newly enslaved people often endured a seasoning or training period in which they were acclimated to the carcerality of plantation environments, the local vernacular, and skills required for their labor regimen (Blassingame, 1979; Phillips, 2007). To counteract plantation oppression, many slaves developed religious, musical, and artistic interests that often served as a form of self-education (Butler, 2023; Genovese, 1976; Williams, 2005). Phillips (2007) claimed, "Plantation life was in itself something of an education" (p. 361). He went even further by stating, "The slave plantation, like other schools, was conditioned by the nature and habituations of its teachers and pupils" (p. 201). We find an example of Phillips' evaluation in Morrison's depiction of the pedagogical relations between Schoolteacher and Sixo. In the novel, Schoolteacher accused Sixo of stealing and cooking a shoat or young pig. To defend himself, Sixo challenged the discourse his master associates with stealing, reasoning that his actions were not stealing per se but an indirect way of improving his value as Schoolteacher's property on a plantation designed to exploit slave labor. Unlike Mr. Garner, Schoolteacher was reluctant to entertain the worldviews, wisdom, or rebuttals of his slaves, particularly Sixo's contributions in these areas. In fact, Morrison (2004) noted that the reasoning and discourse of the pupil-slaves might be perceived by Schoolteacher as backtalk to be treated with re-education, corrections, or punishments that he could document in his notebook. In his rebuttal to Schoolteacher's accusations of theft, Sixo stated, "Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crops. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work" (Morrison, 2004, p. 224). Though his response is reasoned and clever, Schoolteacher beat Sixo to send a message and show him "that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (Morrison, 2004, p. 225).

For some scholars who study Morrison's novel, the multiple discourses embedded in this exchange and others in the text function as layers of knowledge production and further evidence of the ways the pedagogical imperative in the novel is often informed by varying expressions of power in spaces that are also inherently semiotic (Edgerton, 1993; Ng, 2011; Searls, 1997). In fact, Sixo's defense exposes how these elements converge in the pedagogical relations induced by slavery, which arrests or punctuates the signification in language. Schoolteacher's power and authority rest, in part, on his ability to control the heterogeneity in the discourse and actions of his pupil-slaves and the messages that they might send to onlookers on the plantation. In his examination of slavery as an institution, Patterson (2018) reported that

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it is important to consider whether the “social process we call slavery has disposed of all the hidden conceptual accretions of language” (p. 334). In the case of Schoolteacher’s pedagogical relationship with Sixo, one could argue that this appears to be the case. The disruption imposed on Sixo’s discourse and actions reflects the violence inflicted on his body. As a slave master, Schoolteacher’s authority as a pedagogue rests on his curation of discourse as well as the cultivation of labor that belongs to pupil-slaves bounded by the physical and psychic limits that he sets for the Sweet Home slave plantation as a carceral space. As such, Schoolteacher’s regime makes allowances for slaves as chattel and sources of knowledge and profit but not humans or citizens. In fact, slaves are “not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them” (Morrison, 2004, p. 247). In his study, DuBois (1998) described the enslavement of blacks in economic terms. He claimed, “Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal” (p. 16). DuBois’s assessment indicates that, on slave plantations such as Sweet Home, the slave operates as the ultimate sign, functioning as an asset and human tool that is as disposable as Schoolteacher wished (Foster et al., 2020; Patterson, 2018). As expected, the pupil-slaves sought to escape the caprice of their new master and his reign over their minds and bodies. However, it is important to note that, on the Sweet Home slave plantation, the enslaved could not be made “to work for fear of losing liberty, so they had to be made to fear for their lives” (Morgan, 2003, p. 312). To extract work out of “men and women who had nothing to gain but absence of pain,” one had to be willing to “beat, maim, and kill” (p. 313). This approach is essentially what Schoolteacher used to maintain control over his pupil-slaves, their productivity, and the signification of their discourse and actions on the plantation. In fact, Baptist (2014) claimed that torture was often employed as a technique to compel enslaved people to develop new skills and perform monotonous and exhaustive labor with greater efficiency and speed. “Using torture,” argued Baptist, “slavery’s entrepreneurs extracted an amount of innovation virtually equal in numerical measure to all the mechanical ingenuity in all the textile mills in the Western world” (p. 140). Untold breakthroughs in human ingenuity, creativity, and skill emerged among the slaves on plantations because of the technologies or tools developed to turn their experiences, flesh, and brawn into profit for the ends of others (Baptist, 2014; Dennis, 2024b; Rosenthal, 2018). A closer look at Schoolteacher’s extractive pedagogical techniques reveals how this process occurs and how it operates as a feature in the education of his pupil-nephews.

Schoolteacher as Pedagogue

As mentioned earlier, enslaved blacks on the Sweet Home slave plantation signify as laborers and assets. However, they also function as a source of knowledge for advancing the education of Schoolteacher’s pupil-nephews. Sethe described how Schoolteacher would ask his pupil-slaves various questions and write their responses in his notebook. Referring to the text, she stated, “It was a book about us but we didn’t know that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions. He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said” (Morrison, 2004, p. 44). Schoolteacher also used his notebook to record the physical

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characteristics of the slaves on the plantation. Sethe mentioned, “Schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, ’cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all” (p. 226). These are the types of surveillance practices that inform the lessons that he gave to his pupil-nephews. He was teaching them how to investigate the characteristics of the very slaves they came to Sweet Home to oversee, manage, and exploit. For example, Sethe witnessed Schoolteacher standing over one of his pupil-nephews as he transcribed her features according to the instructions provided by Schoolteacher. She heard him say to his pupil-nephew, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (Morrison, 2004, p. 228). Milligan (1999) would agree that, for Schoolteacher and his pupil-nephews, Sethe and the other slaves on the plantation become “collections of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ characteristics that can be tabulated, quantified, and thus objectively and scientifically classified within the animal kingdom and justifying treatment as such” (p. 370). In many ways, Schoolteacher’s pedagogical techniques are “reminiscent of the modern social scientist: careful observation, accurate measurement, and ‘objective’ interrogation of subjects. Data gathered in these ways are carefully recorded and used to confirm or refute theories about the subjects under study” (p. 370). The signs and symbols or *data* used for reference and analysis by Schoolteacher are collected and carefully documented in his notebook then redeployed as the source of his pedagogy, profits, and power. Moreover, these data reinforce an anti-black ethos that ratifies and legitimates his belief that blacks are inferior and should be trained and treated like animals rather than humans and citizens (Dumas, 2016; S. Johnson, 2019; Malott, 2021; Searls, 1997). As such, Schoolteacher’s instruction highlights “the centrality of an ethic of power in the pseudoscientific approach to education he embodies and the capitalistic commodity culture it serves, as well as the violence implicit in that ethic” (Milligan, 1999, p. 369).

Furthermore, Schoolteacher’s pedagogy for his pupil-nephews mirrors the documentation techniques and recordkeeping protocols described in Rosenthal’s (2018) study on the data management practices used by enslavers to manage their slaves and plantations. She reported, “What I saw was a series of interconnected business histories that show how data practices often thought of as quintessentially modern coexisted with and even complemented slavery.” Rosenthal (2018) went on to claim, “Planters’ control over enslaved people made it easier for them to fit their slaves into neat numerical rows and columns. To borrow a twenty-first-century business buzzword, slavery and quantitative management were synergistic” (p. xiii). Like many of the slave owners described in Rosenthal’s study, Schoolteacher experimented with arranging data to make new information visible and understandable, turning the real lives of the slaves on the Sweet Home slave plantation into analog texts that could be categorized, pedagogized, and quantified under the guise of education and for power and profits (Baptist, 2014; Foucault, 1995). Though fictional, Schoolteacher’s documentation of data about his pupil-slaves also adds weight to Ajunwa’s (2023) claim that there is continuity between the ways workers and their data are quantified in the past and present. She argued, “The quantification of workers is not new; it is as old as the valuation of Roman slaves or the counting of bushels of cotton picked by African slaves in the Americas. What sets this new era

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of worker quantification apart is that the quantification is now aided by technological advances grouped under the catch-all term of *artificial intelligence*" (p. 3). Artificial intelligence and advancements in digital technology transform smart devices into data collecting tools and transmitting machines that allow internet corporations such as Google to monitor and monetize one's private and social life for the ends of others. For Sadowski (2019), *data* describes a transcripted and recorded abstraction of phenomena produced by digital technology, algorithms, and human interactions with smart technologies. He reported, "Interacting with smart technologies—especially ones integrated into your everyday, personal life—generates reams of data that would otherwise be out of reach to the companies that want it" (p. 6). Sadowski and others have suggested that the imperialist practices and extraction protocols that supported chattel slavery are not too distant from those encouraged by internet corporations and their digital platforms, which are increasingly used to supplement and advance teaching and learning across space and time (Benjamin, 2019b; Dennis, 2024c; Gilbert, 2024; Malott, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020). Sadowski (2019) claimed, "The same imperialist tactics are being replayed now, but updated for the digital age" (p. 3). For example, corporations such as Google enter territories like Africa and India under the guise of providing subsidized services and enfranchising marginalized people with limited access to the internet and educational opportunities. However, Sadowski claimed that these corporations benefit greatly from the new markets and opportunities these locations and spaces provide for locking people into their digital platforms and extracting their data. This carceral process of accumulation is often referred to as *data colonialism*. The expression describes how data across the globe are pursued, procured, and exploited by technology corporations for their value and profitability (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). In other words, the increasingly sophisticated ways in which artificial intelligence is allied with digitalization to control and commodify human data have "the potential to curtail liberty and harm the well-being of both individuals and broader populations" (Chisnall, 2020, p. 488). In this context, the data that internet corporations find most valuable tend to be about people and their identities, habits, personal information, and social connections. Digitalization transforms one's personal and social realities into digital texts and data that can be stored and curated using computers and smart devices connected by the internet and other advanced technologies (Dennis, 2025; Sadowski, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Though digital inscription or *datafication* has proliferated in commercial domains, Williamson et al. (2020) reported that it has spread outward to include many academic institutions. Digitalization and datafication transform the pedagogical relations between teachers and students and the environments in which teaching and learning can be realized and measured. In fact, the agents and algorithms that support cloud-based learning management systems such as Google Classroom can extract and quantify massive amounts of data about teachers and students, allowing Google to impact the pedagogical activities that support the education of millions of people across the globe (Dennis, 2025; Gilbert, 2024; Levine, 2018).

In their assessment of the growing influence of Google Classroom and other EdTech corporations in Western school systems, Stockman and Nottingham (2022) reported that the *free-to-use products* offered by these corporate entities are commonly mandated by schools that are challenged financially. The authors claimed, "In 2020, Google Classroom's app was

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the most downloaded free education app for Apple devices, estimated to have 40 million students and teachers using this platform for uploading and returning assignments, running distance education events or making lesson materials available online" (p. 4). In many cases, the access to student data through data-harvesting and other extraction protocols may be the true source of compensation for technology companies that support these schools. Google Classroom has claimed it does not collect or use student data for advertising purposes or profiling. However, Stockman and Nottingham (2022) noted that this claim is not the same as Google admitting that it does not mine or collect student data for monetization and profit (also see Levine, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). According to the authors, "The 'big tech' companies, whilst overtly concerned with privacy, are routinely fined for breaches of data protection rights, also those of children and yet, their apps and platforms continue to be integrated in schools at a massive scale" (p. 1). The access that many of these corporations have to the circulation of public and private data across space and time increasingly corresponds to the ubiquity of their power, thus leading to "accumulation by extraction in which personal data is taken with little regard for consent and compensation" (Sadowski, 2019, p. 9).

However, for his data extraction protocol, Schoolteacher does not need the consent of pupil-slaves, whose data double as a sign system and pedagogical content for the education of his pupil-nephews. Unlike his pupil-nephews and students today, Schoolteacher's pupil-slaves are chattel. They also signify as assets with a market and pedagogical value conditioned by an anti-black ethos. For example, Hyldgaard (2006) reported that the formal characteristics of a pedagogical social bond are evident in the master–slave binary. As such, the pedagogical process requires a lack in the pupil or slave that also functions as the condition for *their* representation and obedience. As a slave master, Schoolteacher's discourse does not speak on behalf of implicit knowledge. He can only advance statements that form the foundation on which a field of knowledge can be developed and instrumentalized. However, his pupils must not and often cannot question the truth-value of his statements and their constitution as knowledge on the Sweet Home slave plantation. In such cases, Hyldgaard (2006) noted, "The task of the pedagogue is not to produce knowledge. The task of the pedagogue is to transmit knowledge that is already given. The pedagogue is merely a middleman, a sort of wholesaler" (p. 152). With Hyldgaard's contextualization of this term in mind, one can begin to understand why some academic reformers likened report cards to merchant ledgers in which grades signaled a pedagogical and economic value while also serving as a communication and management tool for quantifying students, regulating their ambitions, and differentiating their education (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Differentiated education aligns with the realities of the division of labor. As in slavery, the idea of equal education is not only forsaken but considered antithetical to the interests of educators and policymakers who might think like Schoolteacher (Dennis, 2024b; Dumas, 2016; S. Johnson, 2019). His pedagogical orientation accounts for his application of methods for the pupil-slaves that are parasitic and largely informed by an anti-black ethos and semiology that conflate black people and enslavement with illiteracy and inferiority (Milligan, 1999; Morrison, 2020).

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In other words, Schoolteacher likened slaves to “people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (Morrison, 2004, p. 177). Under his instruction, the pupil-slaves were socialized to be docile and useful as slaves and commodities and not educated humans with a right to liberty and citizenship. Readers gain insight into Schoolteacher’s commodifying strategies when he reasoned that he could trade one pupil-slave for $900.00 and secure a breeding one, her foal, and another one. The rationalism embedded in his quantification might explain why Morrison concluded that many of the norms and laws designed to legitimize and maintain slavery in the United States could not work as effectively in slave societies such as those found in Ancient Greece and Rome because the people basically resemble one another. In an interview, she stated, “As slaves and ex-slaves, black people were manageable and findable, as no other slave society would be, because they were black” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 127). As such, the visibility of their skin signals a distinct social status in the American public imagination. This signification extends to environments such as the Sweet Home slave plantation that privilege the supremacy of whiteness and wealth that often requires and encourages the anti-black ethos and marginalization that many blacks experienced living in colonial cultures and beyond to persist across space and time (Caison et al., 2021; DuBois, 1998; Taylor-Guthrie, 1994). Morrison (2004) and several scholars indicated that it is not the semiology associated with slavery or black skin that makes black people inferior on a slave plantation or anywhere else. Belief in black inferiority is largely initiated by the fact that white enslavers such as Schoolteacher had to convince themselves and less affluent whites of this disposition to legitimate and protect their wealth and power in a social and economic system in the United States that is—despite the political rhetoric—inherently anti-democratic and unequal (DuBois, 1998; Foster et al., 2020; W. Johnson, 2020). However, Morgan (2003) argued that these relations are more paradoxical and troubling than most imagine. He claimed, “The rise of liberty and equality in America had been accompanied by the rise of slavery” (p. 4). In fact, the fear of interracial rebellion often made enslavers court “the favor of all other whites in a common contempt for persons of darker complexion” (p. 344). Acknowledging this relationship and its semiotic and economic politics might be essential for understanding the rise of the United States as a leading global power. “To a large degree,” Morgan (2003) reported, “it may be said that Americans bought their independence with slave labor” (p. 5). This assessment is supported by Baptist (2014). He claimed, “The idea that the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich is not an idea that people necessarily are happy to hear” (pp. xxi–xxii).

The paradox pointed out by historians such as Morgan (2003) and Baptist (2014) may be contentious for some scholars, but it helps to explain why slavery and anti-blackness have been used strategically and pedagogically to regulate white psychology, labor, and grievances throughout the history of the United States. In fact, slavery informs “how Black existence is imagined and enacted upon, and how non-Black people—and particularly whites—assert their own right to freedom, and right to the consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black” (Dumas, 2016, p. 13). In another interview, Morrison made a similar reflection. She stated, “I feel personally sorrowful about black-white relations a lot of the time because black

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people have always been used as a buffer in this country [United States] between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations" (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 255). There has often been an insistence on the part of the white ruling elite that their working-class brethren subsidize and reproduce the myth of white superiority to help disguise inequalities among whites. Participation tends to come at a high cost for the latter (DuBois, 1998). Historians and others have noted that the rich and powerful can always find ways to command the minds, bodies, and services of those who are not (Frank, 2004; W. Johnson, 2020; Morgan, 2003). As a result, Morrison's (2004) formulation of Schoolteacher as a slave master and pedagogue is significant in that it points to a larger social and political reality in the United States. In short, Schoolteacher's allegiance to the myth of white superiority and black inferiority is not disconnected from the racial pandering and edification used to motivate many less affluent whites to sacrifice economic enfranchisement, pervert laws, ignore moral hazards, and foreclose educational opportunities that would benefit them as well as descendants of slaves in the United States (J. Anderson, 1988; Cox, 1970; Frank, 2004; Patterson, 2018). W. Johnson (2020) encapsulated the pedagogical effect of this conundrum when he stated that "the disciplinary tools and predatory takings originally justified by imperial and racial entitlement come eventually to be deployed against the working class as a whole; the insistent generalization of the tools of empire and anti-Blackness, what Achille Mbembe calls the paradoxical 'Negrofication' of the white world" (p. 8). In many ways, digital technology gives this paradoxical process the kind of momentum and opacity that can make its aims easier to achieve (Chisnall, 2020; Levine, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Morrison's novel helps scholars recognize this phenomenon as an important semiology and consequence of slavery and its digital afterlife. Also, it illuminates why colonial agents constructed, authorized, and advanced whiteness as a pedagogical imperative and educational outcome for less affluent white people at the expense of people of color. However, Warren (2005) and others have indicated that the implications of this history or *living past* are underexplored in the field of education and other disciplines (Dennis, 2024b; Dumas, 2016; Givens, 2021; S. Johnson, 2019; Wilder, 2013). Therefore, this study recommends and encourages more interdisciplinary scholarship in this area and more attention to the contributions that slavery and slave plantations have made to pedagogy and its digital rearticulation. In pursuing this line of inquiry, one may find more compelling evidence from slavery historians, novelists, and others that suggests that the slave plantation played a more pivotal role in the history of education in the United States and elsewhere than many education historians have acknowledged in their scholarship and textbooks.

Conclusion

This study reveals how the world that Morrison creates in *Beloved* explores the carceral dimensions of slavery and slave plantations, signifying their theoretical and pedagogical import in the construction of whiteness via the instrumentalization of anti-blackness. The instrumentalization of anti-blackness and knowledge arrest representation, making this an inherently pedagogical or disciplinary process for regulating discourse and how many people are taught to understand social and economic relations in the United States and other countries.

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Schoolteacher's rule over the Sweet Home slave plantation illustrates this point. Therefore, this study maps the ways in which scholars and practitioners in education and beyond can use Morrison's novel to recalibrate their understanding of the slave plantation as a pivotal site for formal and informal modes of pedagogy, particularly the data extraction protocols used by Schoolteacher to educate his pupil-nephews at the expense of his pupil-slaves. The similarities between Schoolteacher's pedagogy and the data extraction protocols of internet companies such as Google and cloud-based learning management systems such as Google Classroom raise broader questions about the ways data are increasingly placed in the service of power and profits in the name of education. In one sense, this study may be most beneficial in that it reveals how the forms of data extraction evident in a slave economy anticipate those found in the digital economy. Historically, slave plantations and schools have supported and advanced different stages of capitalism in the United States (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Rosenthal, 2018). Digital capitalism and its penchant for surveillance and human data are simply the latest iteration of this dynamic (Benjamin, 2019b; Zuboff, 2019). However, future caution is warranted. Despite the "utility, fascination and sometime delight that networked digital technologies can deliver," argued Chisnall (2020), they are enabling "the emergence of new forms of enslavement" (p. 488). As a sign-making technology, digitalization increasingly turns our lives into biographies or books of data for the ends of others. Moreover, it also collapses the disciplinary boundaries that distinguish humans, money, and texts, making them one and the same sign system that can be used to consolidate and control one's labor and learning covertly and with limited impunity. Morrison's *Beloved* registers slavery and slave plantations as important precursors to this phenomenon as well as the digitalization of data extraction in education. The novel, coupled with the impact of data colonialism inside and outside our academic institutions, makes it more difficult for education historians to absent or underplay these interconnections in their future scholarship and textbooks. Therefore, this study encourages a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to the history of education for those who write, study, or teach it. This study also advances Morrison's novel as an interdisciplinary resource that enriches one's understanding of American literature and history as well as data extraction as a colonial and pedagogical imperative that informs slavery in the past and education in the digital future.

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