

Hush, Little Baby-Ghost: The Postcolonial Gothic and Haunting History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract | The gothic and the postcolonial share common concerns of subversion and transgression; both aim to represent alternative experiences, worldviews, and different histories in literature. This essay discusses the interplay of the gothic and the postcolonial in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to address crises. It asserts that intertwining both genres enables the unspeakable to be spoken, and allows a silenced history of slavery to be heard. I argue that the past, in a crisis like situation, enforces itself into the present and that the past can be seen to haunt the present, thereby indicating *Beloved*'s symbolic representation of a silenced history and repressed traumatic memories. The essay claims that the story has to be told and the memories allowed to be relived in order to come to terms with the trauma of slavery and focuses on the importance of legitimization and narration.

Keywords | trauma, memories, silenced histories, slavery, postcolonial-gothic, American literature

That thy beloved may be delivered (Psalm 60:5)

Beloved (1987),¹ written by Toni Morrison, is an example of a postmodern slave narrative imbued with gothic elements and reminiscent of a traditional ghost story. The haunted house, the baby-ghost, the dead returning to the living, the drinking of

¹ In this article, I use the Vintage publication of *Beloved* (2007); all quotations are taken from this version.

blood, and murder, all work together to construct a narrative of terror and horror. It is “not a story to pass on”, or, in other words, a story to write, as it is too horrific and traumatic to be narrated (Morrison, 2007: 324; Bal, 1999: viii). Nevertheless, Morrison is able to create a narrative through which the unspeakable is spoken or maybe rather signified, which in itself is a gothic feature (Punter, 2003: 196).

The novel’s protagonist is Sethe, a woman who escaped slavery together with her three children while pregnant with her youngest. Shortly thereafter, their owner finds them and Sethe, terrified to see her children return to an enslaved existence and refusing to allow her story to be passed on to her children, attempts to kill all four. She succeeds in killing her daughter, a two-year-old toddler. When her master sees what she is capable of doing, he decides to leave her and the children alone, convinced she is mad. Eighteen years later, Sethe is still haunted by the traumatic memories of slavery and of the ensuing events; additionally, the baby-ghost of her murdered daughter, Beloved, haunts her house. When Beloved physically returns as a young woman to taunt her guilt-ridden mother, Sethe faces a turning point and is required to address her past and exorcise the ghost.

Cathy Caruth, basing herself on Freud, states that trauma is an injury of the mind that cannot simply be fixed in a particular past event that caused the injury; rather, the memory of this event impinges on and is relived in the present (1996: 3-4). In the introduction to *Acts of Memory*, Mieke Bal likewise indicates the imposition of trauma on the present and describes traumatic memories as “the painful resurfacing of events of a traumatic nature” (1999: viii). Sethe’s personal history of slavery and the infanticide she committed as an act of resistance function as related traumas in her life. This trauma, however, remains unresolved and latent, which eventually instigates a crisis, Beloved’s physical return. Beloved’s physical return functions as a turning point in Sethe’s life and forces Sethe to allow her traumatic memories to resurface to be able to integrate the past into the present. It will be my main focus to consider the ghostly haunting in the novel and its function in the text as emblematic of unresolved trauma and of a silenced history, and the crisis of Beloved’s physical return that forces Sethe to deal with her traumatic past.

Additionally, I will indicate and discuss the intersection of the gothic and the postcolonial in *Beloved*, using theory by, among others, David Punter (2000, 2003), Gina Wisker (2005, 2007), and A. Timothy Spaulding (2005). The intersection of both the gothic and the postcolonial allows the narrator to interfere with history to subvert hegemonic historiographies and speak the unspeakable, the history of

slavery. Sethe's personal story is merely one of many similarly traumatic and horrific stories, and *Beloved* draws attention to a collective trauma of slavery that requires legitimization. The baby ghost represents the repressed on a personal level, but based also on Kathleen Brogan's (1998) theory on cultural haunting, I will indicate that it additionally represents a collective, silenced history of slavery. *Beloved's* physical return thus represents the return of the repressed on both levels as well.

Presenting alternative realities, exploring liminal spaces, challenging ontologies, redefining epistemologies, accentuating otherness, the postcolonial and the gothic obviously share common concerns of subversion and transgression. It could even be argued that Postcolonialism and its literature are bound to be gothic, since "they (...) are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past" (Wisker, 2007: 402). This does not mean that all postcolonial literature, in terms of textual and narrative features, can be said to belong to the literary gothic genre. On the contrary, even though many postcolonial texts do use gothic elements, such as the supernatural, to represent alternative worldviews and experiences, some postcolonial texts use realism to rewrite and reclaim histories and identities, for example Chinua Achebe's well-known and classic novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

Wisker explains eloquently in "Crossing Liminal Spaces: Teaching the Postcolonial Gothic" the effect of merging two genres that subvert, transgress, and challenge dominant experiences of reality and ways of knowing:

The postcolonial Gothic reinhabits and reconfigures, it reinstates and newly imagines ways of being, seeing, and expressing from the points of view of and using some of the forms of people whose experiences and expressions have, as Toni Morrison puts it, largely been unheard of and even discredited. (2007: 401- 402)

The postcolonial adds to the gothic a vocalization of what has previously been silenced and marginalized. The postcolonial gothic then presents its readers not merely with an alternative to Western empiricism, but also disturbs Western hegemonic culture and de-marginalizes the colonized experience. Because the postcolonial gothic draws out otherness, explores the liminal spaces, and engages with the supernatural, experiences and expressions that have previously been silenced are given prominence in the text. In *Beloved* this is the history of slavery, genocide, racism, infanticide, but also the effect of slavery and related events on the human psyche. The dedication of the novel, "Sixty Million and more", draws

attention to the vast amount of (hi)stories that are silenced of which *Beloved* is merely one.

As Punter explains in “Arundathi Roy and the House of History”, history and its presence in the present is a “recurrent sense in Gothic fiction (...) the past can never be left behind, (...) it will reappear and exact a necessary price” (2003: 193). This notion of history haunting the present and “the threat of return” are also features of postcolonialism (Punter, 2003: 193). In *Beloved* the immediacy of the past, the conflation of the past with the present, and the active influence of the past on the present are, as Punter also asserts, important themes in which the novel’s interaction with both the postcolonial and the gothic becomes apparent.

Additionally, Spaulding argues in “Ghosts, Haunted Houses, and the Legacy of Slavery” that *Beloved* draws from the gothic genre to enable a rewriting of the past and that Morrison uses gothic features to “expand the parameters of the original slave narrative and traditional history” (2005: 61). As the return of the dead or of the repressed, here *Beloved*’s physical return, is a gothic feature, the gothic becomes a means to allow a disclaimed history to resurface into the present and to simultaneously present an alternative to conventional hegemonic historiographies. This enables Morrison to inscribe into hegemonic history a previously silenced view on and experience of slavery.

In *Beloved* the poignant interference of the past is made apparent through rememory of which *Beloved* herself is an example. Echoing Caruth’s (1996) definition of trauma, rememory signifies the importance and presence of memories, or the past, in the present. The prefix re- indicates that the memory is to be inevitably repeated and relived (Hirsch, 2002: 75; Marks, 2002: 51). Sethe describes rememory as a tangible place or picture that remains after the incident: “[w]hat I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened” (Morrison, 2007: 43). Sethe treats memories, or rather rememories, as tangible in the present, as a place where present and past meet. It is therefore possible to “bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (Morrison, 2007; 43). Because rememory is “spatial and material, tactile”, it is communal and transmissible and points to “the interconnectedness of minds, past and present” (Hirsch, 2002: 74; Rody, 1995: 101-102). Rememory stresses the communal element, and connects the individual as such to their communal heritage

and past. This then draws attention to the larger context in which *Beloved* takes place and to a shared history of slavery.

Accordingly, rememory is closely related to cultural memory, which denotes that memory can be understood both from an individual and a cultural perspective and that it depends on a “collective agency” (Bal, 1999: vii). Several critics, among which Marianne Hirsch, state that rememory is both a noun and a verb that mean remembrance; it refers to the act of remembering and to the memory itself (2002: 74). Bal makes a very similar distinction concerning cultural memory and writes: “it is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer”, thus the memory itself, “but something that you actually perform”, the remembering of the memory (1999: vii).

Michael Kreyling describes the act of rememory as “a process not just attempting to record past events in the order in which they occurred, but to rethink them into the advancing present” (2007: 126-127). As such, rememory is significant in constructing the present and enables accessing the past to transfer memories into the present. Cultural memory likewise connects past and present: “cultural memorization” is “an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (Bal, 1999: vii). Additionally, Caroline Rody (1995) contends that through rememory the present can reform the past, which can lead to emotional healing. Similarly, cultural memory is a means to “mediate or modify” those troublesome, complicated, and denied instances of the past that continue all the same to affect the present (Bal, 1999: vii).

In *Beloved*, rememory draws attention to the notion of a communal past and collective memory, and their gothic interferences with the present, which is represented by the presence of the baby-ghost, Beloved, who haunts Sethe’s house. As Wisker also argues, “the unbearable history of slavery is embodied in the presence of [this] baby-ghost” (2005: 175). Therefore, *Beloved* is not merely a repetition of the familiar ghost story, but functions as an appropriation of this genre in foregrounding cultural haunting. Brogan states in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, “[t]he story of cultural haunting (...) brings to the foreground the communal nature of its ghosts” (1998: 5). Stories of cultural haunting are different from traditional ghost stories, because they highlight a communal past and collective memory and “explore the hidden passageways (...) of a people’s

historical consciousness” (Brogan, 1995: 152).² As such, *Beloved*’s haunting does not merely signify Sethe’s personal repressed trauma of slavery and infanticide, but also a cultural or collective trauma and the imposition of *both* layers of trauma on the present. *Beloved*’s name signals this as well, since the motto of *Beloved* reads, “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved” (Morrison, 2007: n.p.). This biblical quote emphasizes the communal history and collective memory of a people. The stories of Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and *Beloved* are part of a larger history; their personal memory and trauma are part of a collective, shared memory and trauma.

Brogan (1995; 1998) explains that narratives turn to the gothic to reclaim, save from oblivion, and reconstruct history: “[t]hrough the agency of ghosts, group histories that have in some way been threatened, erased, or fragmented are recuperated and revised” (1998: 5-6). A haunting history and latent crisis, embodied by a ghost, need to be resolved through reconfiguring the memories thereof and allowing the past to integrate into the present. This process of obliterating traumatic memories is the main plot of the novel, which is delineated by “a paradigmatic movement from possession to exorcism - or more accurately from bad to good forms of haunting” (Brogan, 1998: 6). Good haunting can be compared to Caruth’s notion of rethinking, which “is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding” (1996: 11). Moving to good haunting does not mean to forget the past and its dead. Rather, it means to transform traumatic memories with their continuous, painful, unexpected, vivid, and unwanted intrusions on the present forcing the sufferer to relive the memory over and over, into what Bal defines as narrative memories, which are based on their emotional meaning important to remember in the present (1999: viii).

In *Beloved* the haunting or possession of Sethe’s house is the result of an utterly traumatic crisis that stirs up continuous feelings of guilt in Sethe and anger in the baby-ghost. The novel opens with: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (Morrison, 2007: 3). As the following quote shows as well, the baby tyrannizes the house:

² It is important to mention that Kathleen Brogan distinguishes between the historical novel and cultural haunting stories. In the latter an interaction between the living and the dead is an important feature and the haunting is literal and not symbolical (1998: 6). This is especially useful to note here, since *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner (Brogan, 1998: 62).

another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill (...) Sethe and the girl Denver (...) waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage (...) “For a baby she throws a powerful spell,” said Denver. “No more powerful than the way I loved her,” Sethe answered. (Morrison, 2007: 3-5)

This shows that the family members portray the baby-ghost not as evil, but rather as angry, sad, lonely, and mistaken (Morrison, 2007: 16). Sethe understands the baby’s anger and grieving, and guilt ridden she desires her daughter to return in order to explain everything. To some extent, Sethe’s guilt corresponds to Caruth’s crisis of trauma, which is “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (1996: 7). Caruth argues that at the heart of trauma lies the crisis of both experiencing a horrific event and surviving it, as both are traumatic experiences. In Sethe’s case, the experience of slavery that lead to the murder of her daughter and the murder itself were related traumatic events. To continue, however, to live after murdering her child and relive these memories is as traumatic and simultaneously engenders guilt about murdering Beloved and about surviving herself. Guilt usurps Sethe and she is desperate to explain and justify her act to her daughter to make living, surviving more bearable.

Some scholars state that Beloved symbolizes Sethe’s guilt resulting from the trauma of murdering her daughter, and that exorcising Beloved will assuage her guilt (Cummings, 1990: 566; Rushdy, 1992: 578; Krumholz, 1992: 401). I find, however, Brogan’s notion that Sethe’s guilt provides the baby-ghost with the prerogative to take possession of the house and to haunt her family more convincing, because Beloved symbolizes much more than mere guilt, as is mentioned above (1998: 7). The mother’s guilt justifies and enables the haunting by the little girl, who is outraged by her mother’s act and “[t]oo little to understand” (Morrison, 2007: 5). In *Guilt*, Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca explains that a person who suffered at the hand of another individual can “demand revenge, claim his rights, ask for justice. But then he must blame someone” (2004: 51). The baby-ghost blames her mother for taking her life; through haunting her mother’s house and through her physical return, she takes revenge and demands justice. Sethe also suffers, but blames herself and burdens herself with guilt. This guilt needs to be resolved and blame must be shifted to whom deserves it, in order to transform bad haunting into a good haunting. Remembering and vocalizing the past in the present can achieve this and recognize a previously silenced history.

Paul D's entrance into Sethe's life functions as a crisis in itself, as it alters the status quo in 124. He causes the first step towards Sethe's crisis that eventually leads to her healing. Paul D exorcises the baby-ghost from 124, when shortly after his arrival the baby-ghost begins to bluster:

his legs were not shaking because of worry, but because the floorboards were and the grinding, shoving floor was only part of it. The house itself was pitching. (...) Paul D was shouting (...) "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. (...) Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet. (Morrison, 2007: 21-22)

But Beloved is not so easily quieted and dismissed; as her sister Denver already anticipates, "the baby got plans" (Morrison, 2007: 45). Paul D's exorcism of the baby-ghost occasions Beloved's physical appearance. Firstly, because she is banished from the house, but secondly because his presence causes repressed memories and emotions embodied by Beloved to resurface in Sethe, who wonders if it would "be alright to go ahead and feel" (Morrison, 2007: 46).

When Paul D, Sethe, and Denver encounter Beloved on the doorstep of 124, Sethe's body responds strongly and she experiences something that closely resembles her water breaking, as if she is about to give birth:

the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity (...) she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless (...) like (...) when Denver was born. (...) there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now. (Morrison, 2007: 61)

Sethe, who focalizes here, connects her bodily reaction to giving birth, signaling that the girl is her daughter. The delivery like event is Sethe's physical response to Beloved's return, and is catalyzed by Beloved's banishment from 124 and Sethe's inability to continue to repress her traumatic memories. Beloved's appearance, as Spaulding asserts, "signals a shift away from a spectral haunting to a concrete confrontation with the history of slavery and its effects" (2005: 68). Beloved comes to claim redress and atonement, but simultaneously she "as the product of rememory is the physical presence of the past in the present" (Spaulding, 2005: 72). Beloved's return then functions as a crisis, a turning point, in Sethe's life that compels her to alter the manner in which she has been dealing with her traumatic past and address the demands of a traumatic past in the present.

Here it is possible to detect that Morrison transgresses generic boundaries and that rememory is the means to “meld historical realism and gothic fantasy” (Patton, 2008: 882). The gothic trope, the ghost, symbolizes and signifies the haunting, traumatic, historical reality of slavery. *Beloved*’s physical return from the dead to the living, also a gothic feature, signals the return of a repressed past and, as a turning point, demands recognition and incorporation of this in the present. This gothic intersection enables Morrison to develop a narrative unrestricted by realism, which allows for a rigorous re-writing and re-claiming of the past that transcends and thus questions the “histories and historical fictions that supposedly present realistic representations of slavery” (Patton, 2008: 882).³

During the time ensuing *Beloved*’s return, Sethe realizes that *Beloved* knows personal things concerning her and her family. She recognizes Sethe’s glass earrings and she knows the lullaby Sethe used to sing to her children, and Sethe understands the girl is the daughter she murdered. Sethe is delighted and believes *Beloved* came back to her, because she forgave her and understood Sethe’s attempt to protect her from slavery, from the degradation of being measured as a biological curiosity, and to “out-hurt the hurter” (Morrison, 2007: 276). Sethe thinks the past is at rest now, that her latent crisis is resolved, and that her rememory can stop, since the past is now successfully integrated into the present.

However, *Beloved* returns to haunt Sethe physically; an argumentative, demanding, and taunting girl replaces the haunting baby. Nothing changed, besides the fact that the ghost, occupying the interstices between death and life, was pushed over these boundaries into the physical realm. It is possible to recognize the correspondence between a ghost existing in between death and life, the traumatic past intruding on the present through rememories, and the impossibility to forget or to remember, since all three notions challenge binary oppositions and deal with

³ Spaulding, however, warns for a too simplistic understanding of the relation between rememory and *Beloved* in the novel. He writes: “Morrison’s characterization of *Beloved* and her treatment of rememory work in tandem to emphasize the inherent complexities of representing the history of slavery in either realistic or gothic terms. More than merely gothic elements of the text, *Beloved* and rememory as symbolic markers or signifiers of an oppositional historiography that combine elements of historical realism and the fantastic” (2005: 66). He points out *Beloved*’s many ambiguous and multiple meanings and understandings in the novel, which also the characters need to deal with. His focus is on Morrison’s adaptation of both the gothic genre and the traditional slave narrative, “in order to address the complexity of slavery, creating both a fictional history and a historical fiction” (2005: 67). It is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore I refer to his book *Re-forming the Past* (2005), in which he explains his reading of *Beloved* and Morrison’s appropriation of the Gothic.

blurry hybrid forms. That the baby-ghost physically returns does not mean, however, that the past too horrible to remember or to forget is resolved; conversely, as Kathleen Brogan (1998) contends, what is needed is a reburial of the dead, an exorcism of the ghost, for Sethe to find peace. In order to resolve dissociation and repression of traumatic memories, Sethe needs to face her memories, her trauma.

Sethe, however, believes the return of her child proves the redundancy of dealing with the past: “[t]hank God I don’t have to remember or say a thing because you know it. All” (Morrison, 2007: 226). But *Beloved* does not understand and demands satisfaction: “I see her face which is mine (...) I have to have my face (...) I see the face I lost Sethe’s is the face (...) I lost” (Morrison, 2007: 251-252). In the chapter from which this quote is taken, *Beloved* sketches the place between life and death and she tells the reader how she lost her face, which is synonymous with her life.⁴ *Beloved* regards Sethe as the emblem of her lost life, since Sethe’s face is recognized as her own lost face. Her goal is to retrieve the face that was taken from her by the person she loves the most.

This is exactly what occurs. Slowly, Sethe fades away under *Beloved*’s influence; she quits her job, starves herself for *Beloved*’s benefit, she serves her every whim, and explains her actions tirelessly. *Beloved* is still angry and “accused her of leaving her behind (...) slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane” (Morrison, 2007: 284-285). Sethe is consumed by her guilt and the past; “*Beloved* feeds off of Sethe, growing fat as the haunted mother thins towards ghostliness: ‘*Beloved* ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it’” (Brogan, 1998: 10). Brogan claims this to be a “vampiric transformation, the living themselves can become ghostly” through the possession of a ghostly past (1998: 10). Sethe “(sits) around like a rag doll, broke down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for” (Morrison, 2007: 286). Her life is pulled out of her by *Beloved*, who is, on the other hand, desperately seeking for a confirmation of life, which she can merely take from Sethe as retrieval from the life Sethe took.

⁴ The face is a significant symbol in this particular chapter of *Beloved* and functions here also as a signifier of identity. It is, however, beyond the scope of my argument to examine this symbolism. For further information on this, I refer to “Pleasuring Identity, or the Delicious Politics of Belonging” (2000) written by Marlon B. Ross. Additionally, the narrator stresses the importance of the mother’s face to a young child. Jacques Lacan theorizes this importance when he discusses the Other as a position that is occupied, at first, by a child’s mother (Ashcroft et al., 2007: 155). This is related to Lacan’s mirror stage, which constitutes an important part in a child’s development and in the formation of a child’s identity. See for further information *Écrits: A Selection*, which was originally published in 1977.

Despite all of this however, Sethe is afraid for Beloved to leave. I quote to some extent from the novel here, because this excerpt describes strikingly and austere the crisis of a mother faced with a choice between two horrific options and her following crisis of living with tremendous guilt over murdering her daughter:

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. (...) Sethe's greatest fear was (...) that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that hot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse—was (...) That anybody white could take your whole self (...) Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were (...) nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. (Morrison, 2007: 295-296)

Sethe is clearly consumed with guilt, even though she is simultaneously convinced that at the time it was the right decision. This duality exemplifies that *Beloved* explores the transgressive and deviant. Cedric Gael Bryant states in “The Soul has Bandaged Moments”: “[t]respassing prohibited literal or ideological space is a central gothic motif within African American literature”, murdering your own child is an example of such trespassing (2005: 546). Infanticide is an act inherently contrary to a mother's nature and subverts a traditional understanding of motherhood, but the narrative focuses on what instigates such an act, perhaps even justifies such an act, the truly gothic horrors of slavery.

Sethe's fear that Beloved will leave signals Sethe's resistance to facing her traumatic memories, and resulting from this, to overcoming the trauma of slavery and infanticide. Beloved's return is to Sethe proof that “she would not have to remember now” (Morrison, 2007: 214). Rather than encountering intrusive and unwanted memories that are “an external reality that can take possession”, which is embodied in Beloved's presence and haunting, Sethe needs to allow the memories, the ghost, to be exorcised (Brogan, 1998: 7). This can be achieved through remembering and narratively integrating traumatic memories in the present. Trauma, however, resists narrative integration when the “memorizing agent” does not master the memories, but rather re-lives the memory and is overwhelmed by its currentness in the present (Bal, 1999: viii). Sethe's unwillingness to remember deprives Beloved of resting in peace and hinders a good form of haunting. Were Sethe able to master, narratively integrate, and legitimize her traumatic memories, the dead, the ghost, would be reburied and find rest.

Sethe, however, desires the ghost to stay, in order to clear herself from guilt, explain her act, and make up for killing Beloved and surviving herself. This guilt restrains her from overcoming trauma, and consequently forces Sethe to relive it and causes her to be haunted by her past. Sethe seems stuck in the crisis of death and the crisis of life, as Caruth defines it, stuck due to the incompatibility and simultaneous intertwining of “the death of a loved one and the ongoing life of the survivor” (1996: 8). Allowing Beloved to leave, allowing the past to become the past, and being at peace with surviving the past, would mean to overcome trauma and accept the incompatibility and intertwining of the stories of life and death. It is, however, precisely this “inextricability of the story of one’s life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling” that allows Sethe, as a survivor, to bear “historical witness” and demand recognition of silenced and disavowed histories (Caruth, 1996: 8).

Eventually, the exorcism of the baby ghost and narrative integration of trauma is achieved through rememory and a reenactment of the situation that prompted Sethe to kill her daughter, and Sethe is enabled to bear historical witness. When the town’s women hear about Beloved physically haunting Sethe and that Sethe is slowly dying under her spell, they gather at Sethe’s house to rescue her. Significantly, these are the same women who were also present when Sethe killed Beloved. When they arrive at Sethe’s house they are brought back to that particular day when Sethe’s previous owner, Schoolteacher, arrived at 124, and when Sethe killed her daughter. Shortly after the women, Sethe’s landlord, a white man, arrives. When Sethe sees him, the past enforces itself on the present and she relives the trauma of killing her daughter. This time, however, she attacks the white man with an ice pick, empowered by the singing prayer of the women. Her “weapon is a symbolic pointing of the finger, naming white guilt for the evil consequences of slavery” (Brogan, 1998: 7). She is able to redirect her anger and blame in the correct outward direction and relieve herself from guilt. She reenacts the scene through rememory, but simultaneously is able to master the memory and alter its course; “the present takes the past in a new and transforming embrace” (Rody, 1995: 103). Beloved is gone after this event: “when they got Sethe down on the ground and the ice pick out of her hands and looked back to the house, it was gone” (Morrison, 2007: 315).

It is significant that Sethe’s liberating rememory is experienced in the presence of community, who simultaneously rememory that particular day. Caroline Rody claims that the women are “the voice of a communal chorus and a narrative voice of an oral

quality” (1995: 97). Sethe’s reenactment of the scene is thus a form of oral narration, since she repeats the event while others witness it. The memory is hereby narrated and integrated into the present and legitimized, which is prerequisite to overcoming trauma. Bal explains: “traumatic memories [need] to be legitimized and narratively integrated into the present in order to lose their hold over the subject who suffered the traumatizing event in the past” (1999: viii). After Sethe narrated her traumatic memories and received legitimization, *Beloved*’s hold over her is indeed broken.

In addition to legitimizing Sethe’s trauma and listening to her narrative, the presence of the same community that was present as when *Beloved* was murdered draws attention to the importance of collective and communal history. Their presence signifies that the collective history and “the denied ghosts of the American past are finally integrated into America’s” history (Brogan, 1998: 8). The bad haunting is transformed into “historical consciousness as a good form of haunting” (Brogan, 1998: 8). Through Sethe’s testimony and witness of her (hi)story, the collective and communal, yet diverse and personal, horrors and traumas of slavery are pointed towards, acknowledged, and inscribed in history.

To conclude, Tabish Khair writes, “the Gothic novel ‘gives great scope for the portrayal of violent emotion’” (Tompkins quoted in Khair, 2009: 86). *Beloved* is emblematic of this claim. The gothic enables Morrison to write about an unspeakable act, an act that can hardly be put into words, let alone the underlying emotional motives and the consequential haunting guilt and loss. Additionally, the gothic provides the opportunity to drastically rewrite and reclaim a silenced history by showing that a silenced history will cause haunting and possession by the past, since that past is not acknowledged or allowed to exist. The crisis of the continuous impingement of traumatic memories on the present indicates the necessity to integrate the past into the present, in order to exorcise the ghostly memories and resolve the crisis caused by repressed memories. The inability to let the past and its dead rest shows the need for rememory and acknowledgement of the past. Morrison develops this in *Beloved* through her appropriation of the gothic novel and the intersection with the postcolonial.

Beloved draws attention to the collective trauma of slavery and the Gothic “creates an alternative representation of slavery that (...) forces readers to shift their focus away from (...) the haunted house and the ghost toward the ‘real’ gothic elements of the text: slavery itself and those who systematically perpetuated it” (Spaulding, 2005: 63). As indicated, this gothic history of slavery needs to be released

from its ghostly status, ghostly due to disavowal and denial, through narration, recognition, and integration into the hegemonic histories. Then haunting and possession by a ghostly past can be transformed into historical consciousness; bad haunting can become good haunting. *Beloved* shows its readers that the gothic story is not the haunting by ghosts or infanticide, but that what has gone before and what drove Sethe to kill her daughter. The gothic story is the history of people owning people, of racism, abuse, rape, and the treatment of people as animals. It is the history of slavery that was truly gothic.

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