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Trauma, Agency, Kitsch and the Excesses of the Real: *Beloved* Within the Field of Critical Response

Sethe is the banker, the subject, the owner (...), the namer (...), and she is atonement, the mending and fixing (...); and she is the essential parent (...); and she is Christ, crucified but resurrected. (Atlas)

Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of worldlessly asserting what is barred to politics. (Adorno)

This article will operate on two levels: it will re-read the text proper in terms of its narrative politics vis-à-vis American history and particularly African-American women's subjectivity and agency; it will also address the legacy of secondary readings of Morrison's 1987 novel and will concern itself with a troubling issue within that critical field, namely the emergence of an iconography of what I want to call trauma kitsch. I will engage a predominant trend in this reception history, in "defense," as it were, of the novel's excess to critical narratives that have begun to overwrite it over the years. Situated within an environment of 1990's ubiquitous trauma discourses,<sup>1</sup> this reception has developed a recurring feature which achieved a striking reduction of the text, a tendency to contain the text in more or less sophisticated "post-traumatic-stress-disorder" frames<sup>2</sup> which assume a cause, a symptom, and testimony as a cure. Instead my reading suggest to refocus attention on the novel's strategy to "encircle again and again the site" of the trauma, "to mark it in its very impossibility"<sup>3</sup> in ways that cannot hold its excess of the real.

To write about *Beloved* at this point in time means to sift through a rich history of secondary literature whose authors have almost unanimously agreed on enthusiastically greeting *Beloved* as a breakthrough moment for African-American and/or postcolonial post-Middle-Passage cultural reconstruction. The Middle Passage existed, until the last decades of the 20th century, largely on the periphery of white western collective memory. Literary writing thus faced an ethical and aesthetic challenge to *invent* memory, as paradoxical as it may sound; the last twenty years have thus seen an impressive number of those attempts in African-American and/or

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the veritable deluge of popularized trauma discourse contributions of more or less mediocre status on all levels of media circulation, from seriously engaged feminist foundational texts to soap opera and talk show material. For critical readings see Ballinger, Caruth, Edkins, Felman, Flanagan, Huyssen, Radstone and Hodgkins.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential and term-setting works in the dissemination of those discourses was Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. 1992. (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. (London: Verso, 1991), 272.

postcolonial cultural space to create "counter memory" in the Foucauldian sense. Critics have amply responded to this move by creating a sophisticated discourse of the relation between the writing of literature and history, and about the role of cultural memory in the context of postmodernity's loss of innocence about modernity's advances. The push for writing black diasporic memory can be directly related to the postcolonial moment that addresses a recuperation of lost history, an overdue representation of the undersides of modernity's imperial discourses. Morrison and other authors writing from the perspective of oppressed and marginalized cultures or subcultures invested considerable urgency in this making of memory: cultural memory in their historical moment found itself in a state of "referential debt" to the victims of history.<sup>4</sup> Modernity's ellipses have over the last decades become displaced by way of artistic recuperation of the colonial and imperial past from the point of view of those previously muted subjects. *Beloved's* first critics could not have anticipated a problem which presents itself urgently after almost twenty years of widespread reception, scholarly and popular, and after a veritable deluge of collective memorizing of modernity's atrocities: that push for recuperation has oftentimes congealed into a rhetorics of trauma that verges on, and sometimes crosses over into kitsch. This strategy might have allowed participating agents some newly found access to cultural capital but it also served to domesticate, or gentrify, as Edkins calls it,<sup>5</sup> traumatic memory. As Andreas Huyssen recently observed: "Key questions of contemporary culture are located precisely at the threshold between traumatic memory and the commercial media. (...) trauma is marketed as much as the fun is, and not even for different memory consumers."<sup>6</sup> Thus, looking at the novel again entails to raise questions as to the problematics of trauma and its witnessing as a by now quite popularized "kitsch" mode of discourse and as to how the text figures—and survives—within these discourses. There exist any number of psychoanalytically oriented, politically, semiotically, and narratologically focussed readings. The crucial differences between these secondary readings are determined not mainly by those various registers but more by the question as to whether critics have read the novel in a framework of redemption or as a somewhat "unframable" text distinguished by its very excess of the traumatic real.

A critical approach like Shoshona Felman's and Dori Laub's influential 1992 *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* radically recast the aesthetic question of the crisis in 20th century narrative as an ethical question of witnessing trauma. Both argue in their joint "Foreword:"

What is furthermore (...) the relation between narration and history, between art and memory, between speech and survival? Through an alternation of a literary and a clinical perspective, the present study strives to grasp and to articulate the obscure relation between witnessing, events and evidence, as what defines at once the common ground between literature and ethics, and the meeting point between violence and culture, the very moment when, precisely, the phenomenon of violence, and the phenomenon of culture come to clash—and yet to mingle—in contemporary history." (Felman and Laub xiii)

In their text, however, which insisted on the *crisis* of witnessing, they did not assume testimony in art or literature as an easily available option to cure history's violences, nor did their comparative perspective mislead them to simply conflate the therapeutic setting with the aesthetic production and reception of testimony. Grounding their argument in Adorno's aporetic scepticism against art "after Auschwitz" they turned to literature not for any supposedly ample healing potential but for its ability to "write against itself" in Felman's paraphrase of Adorno. (Felman and Laub 34) In the trajectory

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<sup>4</sup> Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.

of *Beloved's* critical reception this momentum of negativity has in many instances receded in favor of rather positivist expectations. Taking up this critical controversy I want to side with Clifton Spargo in his discussion of La Capra's *Writing Trauma, Writing History*.<sup>7</sup> Spargo aptly characterizes La Capra's approach as problematic precisely because, however sophisticated its argument, in its dissemination it enables a kind of therapeutic optimism. To quote Spargo:

What LaCapra wants to impress upon us is the capacity of a subjectivity that, having experienced a trauma, comes to inhabit history, rather than be inhabited by it. Many critics have proposed reading the ending of *Beloved* as an achievement on this order, with the communal exorcism denoting both an act of working through or moving beyond a traumatic relation to loss and, at the same time, an ethical intervention consistent with the therapeutic ethic; (they) read the novel's ending as truly recuperative or redemptive.<sup>8</sup>

A wishful conflation—in critical responses to the novel—between psychoanalytical therapeutic practice with trauma survivors on the one hand, and the effects of reading on the other hand has, in my view, served as an intellectual platform for all too smooth readings of trauma testimony in literature which themselves sometimes verged on kitsch. This recuperative script called for identificatory hermeneutics, for undiluted empathy given to a feminist survivor's agency beyond the dead-end of cynical postmodernist dismissal of the subject's possible ownership of history. In some versions of this approach their compassion has permitted critics to reduce what must be considered to be one of the most ambiguous literary projects of the 20th century into a straightforward tale of feminine community heroics borne by the creation of a "meaningful," "whole" and "coherent story" that will change lives and "refigure the future" as in Emilia Ippolito's reading of *Beloved* which—after all—appears as the one selected contribution covering the novel in an ambitious compilation to address *The Poetics of Memory*:

By shifting the dominant white and male metaphor to a black and female metaphor for self and history, Sethe effectively changes (...) finally, the story itself. A story of oppression becomes a story of liberation. (...) Sethe's actions, moreover, demonstrate how the present is bound to the past and the past to the future, and how, through the re-configuration of the past, it is possible to refigure the future (...). Narrativization enables Sethe to construct a meaningful life-story from a cluster of images, to transform separate and disparate events into a whole and coherent story (...) Therefore Sethe, revising her own actions and re-writing her own history has the power to preserve the community, and reciprocally, the community has the power to protect one of them (...) The reader learns, like Sethe, that it is necessary to claim and surrender the past in order to refigure the future.<sup>9</sup>

It needs to be said that it was precisely *Beloved's* seductive force of creating a literary subject—beyond the lure of realism but insistent of and attractive for its promise to overcome the trauma of the Middle Passage and New World slavery—which intrigued even more sceptical readers. A number of critics<sup>10</sup> realized that this attractive textual

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<sup>7</sup> See Dominick LaCapra. *Writing Trauma, Writing History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 90

<sup>8</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, "Trauma and the Specters of Enslavement in Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Mosaic* 35.1 (2002): 113–131), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Emilia Ippolito, "History, Oral Memory and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*The Poetics of Memory*. Ed. Thomas Wägenbaur. Tuebingen: Stauffenburg, 1998. 198–203), 198-203).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Ulf Schulenberg, *Zwischen Realismus und Avantgarde: Drei Paradigmen für die Aporien des Entweder-Oder* (Frankfurt: Lang Verlag,

power was indeed at work in the novel, located in its quasi-romantic survivors' closure of Sethe and Paul D re-united and in Denver's uplift narrative; they also acknowledged however that—at the same time, and as an excess undercurrent to that plotting—the text refuses to heal and work through successfully the African-American history of traumatization. In the course of twenty years and increasing academic, and mass popularity this textual excess, *Beloved's* "tarrying with the negative" in Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian terms,<sup>11</sup> has come to be accumulatively neglected at the cost of a sometimes downright melodramatic post-trauma iconography, precisely what I prefer to name kitsch. Along those lines, critic John Rohrkemper calls *Beloved's* confrontation with the past a "requisite for mental health;" for him, without further ambiguity, the novel's "contemplation of the past is a form of therapy."<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, Emma Parker called the community's chant to exorcise the haunt "revolutionary" in its "eruption of the semiotic within the symbolic" which is allegedly able to force "a change in the structures of the dominant order." According to Parker "[n]arratives that emerge out of hysteria [such as Sethe's] have the potential to create a new perspective on the past that creates new possibilities for the future."<sup>13</sup>

But let me backtrack into the text before taking up my argument again. With *Beloved*, Morrison created a text which signifies on remnants of oral history, on rare documents like slave narratives and archive pieces of journalism, and on her imagination—as she herself has amply suggested and a host of critics has repeatedly noted. Thus, she created cultural access to "as-if-testimony."<sup>14</sup> To make this endeavor work, Morrison's text insisted on relentlessly subjective voices of memory inscribed in the most intimate place: a person's body, and it successfully asked readers to suspend disbelief at a "rememory" of her characters' interiority, to willingly enter the text via a pointed empathy with the characters' "bodies in pain," in Elaine Scarry's term. Morrison directed her readers to violated black flesh and blood as the site of African-American people's most painful memories, as if to dare readers to accept the authenticity of their claims by way of exposure to their most interior pain. The literary focus on the body's vulnerable materiality made it possible for Morrison to allow her readers imaginative emotional contact with a human being who historically was not entitled to claim any acknowledged access to the symbolic and thus could not figure as subjects in/of communication. By way of drawing the reader into an identificatory relationship with those pained speaking bodies' of black (ex)slaves, Morrison created an intimacy which resulted in powerful effects of verissimilitude. This literary strategy entails considerable danger: it always borders on what Hortense Spillers—in the context of American abolitionist writing—has called "porno-trope:" a parading of the suffering black body as stimulans and

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2000); Mary Panicia Carden, "Models of Memory and Romance: The Dual Endings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 45.4 (1999): 401–427); Kimberly Chabot Davis, "'Postmodern Blackness': Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the End of History" *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies*. Ed. John N. Duvall. (Albany, NY: State of New York Press, 2002), 75–92); Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. "Narration, Doubt, Retrieval: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Narrative* 4.2 (1996): 109–123 and Sabine Broeck, *White Amnesia—Black Memory: American Women's Writing and History* (Frankfurt/New York: Lang, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 237.

<sup>12</sup> John Rohrkemper, "'The Site of Memory': Narrative and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Midwestern-Miscellany* 24 (1996): 51–62), 55.

<sup>13</sup> Emma Parker, "New Hysteria in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 47.1 (2001): 1–19), 3, 11, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Broeck, *White Amnesia—Black Memory*, 29.

satisfaction for a (possibly white or black) readerly voyeuristic gaze.<sup>15</sup> Even if this interaction between text and reader has not necessarily entailed the directly sado-masochistic element Spillers suspected with her argument, the text ran the risk of offering up its suffering agents to a quite voracious readerly identification with their traumatization which swiftly, and without turning any attention to the novel's unresolved lacunae, has been read as raw material to "freely generate the future," as Emily Budick exulted in her discussion:

Thus *Beloved* remembers, not through telling a single story (...) but by placing one story next to the other, insisting that each of these stories register and respond to each other, and holding hand.(...) This story remembers the past, not by literally re-memembering it but by gathering together its pieces, placing one next to the other, and letting these pieces freely generate the future, that hopefully will remember them.<sup>16</sup>

### **Working Through Trauma Successfully?**

Not all critics have realized that the experiences which are being witnessed to in this novel, involve *two* rather different kinds of traumatic moments to which the text responds with two different narrative strategies respectively. The first one is the collective historical experience of the Middle Passage and slavery which held all characters in the text as either captive human beings subjected to white people's interests, their violence, and their very whims and fancies or held them, as children of slaves, captive to that oppressive ancestral memory, like Denver. Morrison, as I have detailed elsewhere (see Broeck 20-40) decided to answer that historical trauma with what I think was a politically far-reaching vision of African-American subjects entering American history on their own terms. The cultural power of this plot culmination which has an expectant, future bound-closure to its own tale of destruction and reconstruction is immediately obvious particularly when situated in the context of richly emerged African-American and white feminisms in the later 1980s and 1990s.

Albeit for different reasons, African-American and white female readers were eager to absorb and to emulate strong African-American female role models who could testify to incredible hardship, even to traumatic oppression, and still come out of it as human beings. The particular mother and daughter double that *Beloved* created fed that desire in rather seductive terms: it is the daughter who—having emerged from utter isolation into life within mainstream society—helps save her mother from traumatic recollection, from being consumed by her rememory. The text itself enables a reading (which runs like a narrative thread of its own through the entire body of *Beloved* reception) according to which the young generation (Denver) could heal their ancestors in retrospect to be able to go on with their own lives, at the same time that the mother generation is being given a dignified position as—however fallible—human subjects, not as enslaved chattel objects, in American memory, even if that entails a suspension of readerly judgement about child murder. Jan Campbell thus argues that the novel provides a "passage from trauma to spiritual healing and from the real to the symbolic;" according to her also rather upbeat evaluation *Beloved* allows readers to read history "through the trace of the mother, (...) which could mobilize history within a narrative model which is not Oedipal."<sup>17</sup> This fantasy of "mobilizing history" has been shared by many academic critics—however complexly their arguments addressed the text—because the text provided many white and black academics tired of postmodernity's indifference, its "subjectless-ness," and its contempt for "historizing"

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<sup>15</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (*diacritics* (Summer 1987): 65–81), 30.

<sup>16</sup> Emily-Miller Budick, "Absence, Loss and the Space of History in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Arizona-Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* 48.2 (1992): 117–138), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, Jan. "Images of the Real: Reading History and Psychoanalysis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Women: A Cultural Review* 7.2 (1996): 136–149), 137.

with an enthusiastically greeted textual alternative.<sup>18</sup>

I assume that on the whole white and African-American readers will have had different emotional and intellectual investments in those scenarios. For African-American readers the possibility of self-empowerment, social and personal agency, and a productive concept of subjectivity that was not forever bound by slavery's ghosts might have held a potentially transformative powerful attraction. White readers/critics might have felt they are being presented with an updated, politically correct black female subject who epitomized the Clinton era's reconciliation climate precisely in her insistence on the necessity for readers to share in an overdue collective confrontation with the national trauma of slavery. A much desirable image of African-American mother and daughter bonding could perfectly embody the redemptive drive of an American culture under reconstruction. An American liberal mainstream culture post the canon-debates which—after decades of Black (male and female) Power, Black Studies and the multiculturalism controversy—had understood that they needed to come to terms with the undersides of their national legacy. For that process to be spiritually guided by a novel centered on women survivor icons like Sethe and her affirmative offspring Denver might have been much preferable to those readers than having to deal with the "gangsta" rapper—representatives of the intimidating real of inner-American cities and the rougher elements of hip-hop cultures. Judging by the novel's mass marketing success one could extend the point: a largely female American reading public absorbed this re-maternalized history as a redemptive gift.

*Beloved's* imagination of agency thus enabled white readers to repent before the African-American mother, as it were, and to re-possess history by way of their own absorption by and immersion in the imaginary traumatized African-American psyche and its scripted body. Some critics have eagerly grasped the possibility to read Sethe as the novel's textual embodiment of a "primal mother;" the very pathos Morrison enveloped her character in, including an invitation to readers to share in the exorcism of history's ghost in order to redeem the mother figure, made an identificatory desire possible and attractive. Helen Moglen's critical phrasing captures that desire succinctly:

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison lifts the primal mother out of that prelinguistic space and returns her to history (...). By centering in her narrative a black woman who is, not incidentally, a mother, Morrison documents the tragic human cost of being "other," and takes us into the dim regions of desubjectification and undifferentiation that were not explored by Freud or by Lacan.<sup>19</sup>

*Beloved* offers a model of subjectivity beyond the alternative of either a subscription to oppressive western teleology or a joyous abandon to fragmentation. In the history of the text's reception this feature has, over the years, slid into an almost mythical, certainly naive faith in the social and individual "cure" the novel can preside over, which I call a kitsch reception. Taking her cue from the widely circulated Morrison interview with Masha Darling, Morgenstern speaks of Morrison's "avowed investment in the possibility of cure, the manageability of history"<sup>20</sup> and points to a problematic alliance between the author's own investments in her text and those of critical readers:

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Mae Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text" (*Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text*, Ed. Hortense Spillers. New York: Routledge, 1991), 62–86; Spargo's article on "Trauma"; Ulf Schulenberg's study, or my work in this field.

<sup>19</sup> Helene Moglen, "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 201–220), 205.

<sup>20</sup> Naomi Morgenstern, "Mother's Milk and Sister's Blood" (*Differences* 8.2 (1997): 101–126), 123.

Much of the criticism on *Beloved* celebrates the text as it retells its story as a story of cure. (See Duvall, Horvitz, Mathieson, Rushdy and Wyatt) (...) It is not so much that these therapeutic or celebratory readings are wrong (the text provides plenty support for such readings), but that it seems worth scrutinizing their investment in such a healing project. In successfully doing the work of reading *Beloved* as a progressive narrative (...) the criticism becomes itself, or is able to present itself as, a powerful antidote to the culture's ills and trauma's resistance to narrativization. (Morgenstern 122)

Notwithstanding this scepticism, *Beloved* seems to have managed to undo Baldwin's statement that "in the context of the Negro problem neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back," and that "[t]his horror [of the past] has so welded past and present that it is virtually impossible and certainly meaningless to speak of it as occurring, as it were, in time."<sup>21</sup> The novel signalled the possibility of redemption by way of black women's agency and one could argue that Morrison's plot in *Beloved* indeed managed to put slavery "in time." This notion of the text as the creative locus of socially and individually effective therapeutic agency interestingly conflates the novel's author, its powerful female protagonists and its desirous readers in a kitsch scenario of mutual identification, as statements like the following from the *African-American Review* in 1992 indicate: "history-making becomes a healing process for the characters, the reader, and the author."<sup>22</sup>

If *Beloved* thus addresses post-feminist desires for agency the novel may be read as seductive platform for a fantasy that literature can sustain but life cannot. As a powerful symbolic gesture *Beloved* extends an option to understand the recourse to trauma as sine-qua-non to negotiate subjectivity and sociality, to rescue trauma—as it were—from its pariah status of the shameful and secretly withheld or suppressed. It installed African-American women who used to be the absolute non-signified as meta-signifiers of American history by staging them as honorable survivors of trauma, and it elevated the act of publicly sharing the experience, of "working it through," as the popular term has it, to the status of coveted cultural capital and competence. This in turn might have strengthened the African-American community's position vis-à-vis mainstream American culture; it certainly helped to reconcile white readers with their historical guilt by way of a paradox and disquieting readerly identification with the victims of slavery. *Beloved* enabled readerly containment of trauma as a sublime constitutive experience which may, finally, be absorbed rather than aggressively rejected. *Beloved* in concert with a critical environment its author herself had helped to emerge, called forward a nationally digestible and manageable Clintonian and post-feminist discourse on slavery to be circulated against the text's own excess of inaccessibility.

However, the question remains if and how the literary text which underneath its reconciliatory plot holds on to an excess of non-realism, of non-comprehension, and of non-closure at its narrative (and ethical) core may successfully resist this rapid kitsch commodification. It does so by pushing realism to its very limits, expanding realism's range to the point of burst. For this project of stretching realism, *Beloved* is constructed as a narrative construction, at the same time, of 'durée,' and fragmentation, of a propelling desire for the completion of its plot as well as of narrative excess. Closure thus appears as only one option of the novel which becomes most manifest in Denver's development. After having saved her mother from being eaten up by her trauma, the ghost of her baby child, she goes on to become an active member of late 19th century black society, and thus to be 'in history,' which the novel opposes to a traumatized Sethe's "no-time."<sup>23</sup> Denver successfully contacts the abolitionist Bodwins for work, to support Sethe and herself; she has the prospect to attend Oberlin College. Baby Sugg's admonition that there is "no defense" (*Beloved* 245) against (white) evil or failure, but to

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<sup>21</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955. London: Pluto Press, 1985), xii and 6.

<sup>22</sup> Krumholz, Linda. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 395–408), 395.

<sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 191.

know it and "go on out the yard" (*Beloved* 245), that is, to live in worldliness in spite of its threat, is just as important a textual reservation vis-à-vis Denver's self-'uplift' as is Paul D's held back objection to Mrs. Bodwin's college plans for the girl: "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (*Beloved* 266). But Morrison brackets this objection off to us, the readers, and refuses to have the girl be impeded by the knowledge of it. Denver, after spending the longest time of her life in virtual isolation, cut off from the Symbolic and from any real life outside 124, as it were, will at the end participate in her own community's making of meaning and making of collective memory, however much ambivalent and conflicted that process might turn out. Having re-entered social life, Denver becomes part of a cultural repertoire that may (and will) be claimed as "history."

### **The Real and Its Excess**

However, "this is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 275) seems to be Morrison's self-reflective comment on the severe crisis of realism evoked by the novel's final words about Beloved's disappearance. The novel's rememory does not evolve complacently within emplotment. It remains outside, in excess of the survivors' story that is at the novel's end safely beyond trauma. Morrison's verdict in the novel's coda signifies to me that her most important communication to us has not been emplottable as story. Morrison's text, but not, as she maintains, a community in the real world, may linger on Beloved's trace that becomes "just weather" (*Beloved* 275), not the "breath of the disremembered," (*Beloved* 275)—something so demanding and inconceivable at the same time, not even Morrison's verbal creation can contain it within the story proper. The text, in its inner ambiguity, claims that whereas African-Americans have been able to enter 'history' and have become the agents of their own historical memory there is a certain memory in the flesh, a pain so visceral it cannot enter consciousness, and a history so absent, it cannot enter the mediation of collective memory to cope with trauma. So that a writer can surrealistically gesture at it as do Beloved's monologues, but story, in the sense of emplotted memory, cannot reach it. One of *Beloved's* most stunning achievements, and the one most pertinent to a discussion about memory, is thus to pull two antagonistic impulses together in one text: the necessity and option to *make* memory to get beyond the haunting ghosts of history on the one hand, and on the other hand, a strategically failing attempt at writing historical trauma, to quote Shoshona Felman ,

to make the referent come back, paradoxically, as something heretofore unseen in history; to reveal the real as the impact of a literality that history cannot assimilate or integrate as knowledge, but that it keeps encountering in the return of the song. (Felman 276)

The second traumatic experience the text orchestrates undercuts the plot's option for closure, let alone any smooth identificatory illusions on the part of audiences that history will be that easily worked through and collectively, even nationally, owned. Sethe's act of killing her child conjectures a text which—paraphrasing Celan's *Bremen Speech* (Felman 26)—passes through its own answerlessness in a series of ruptures in its semantic, syntactic and narrative field which seriously undermine the text's plot drive. Sethe's act of killing her beloved baby—for which in the novel's ethics no white person can be held responsible because it was her very first act as a free human being—causes the text to collapse into a series of mono-syllables: "No. No. Nono. Nonono." (*Beloved* 163) Ultimately, the act of killing the child cannot be *narrativized*, which means, it may not be "worked through" by Sethe. Not even Morrison can make her say what she actually did. Readers, however, are being put through what happened by an excessive visceral richness of words circling obsessively to get a syntactic and semantic hold of memories that made the child murder possible; by an *unsuccessful* effort to figure an answer to the trauma of an African-American mother killing her own child. The novel does *not* produce cathartic narrative text about the murder which ultimately could be integrated into Sethe's recollections, her "story." Instead of integration the text stages a second willful abandonment of Beloved by way of an exorcism of the ghost, and the disappearance of the young woman from the

community's (including Sethe's) collective memory. Instead of a "story" which would still make a claim on Sethe and everybody else, albeit not a voraciously aggressive one, there remains only "weather." To push the point even further: the very possibility of "story" for Sethe, Paul D, Denver and the community depends on the absence of Beloved's trauma (of having been killed by her mother) from it.

The narrative meets its disruption after Sethe's and Denver's "unspeakable thoughts" in Part Two, at a point where one could rightfully expect a narrative climax, since the novel up to this point has prepared readers for a revelation of the characters' innermost motivations which would propel the plot to satisfying closure. Instead, long interior monologues accumulate disintegration: characters (Sethe's grandmother, Sethe's mother, Sethe, Beloved) are blurred and merged, one voice is speaking in various registers of personal memory at once, any time frame is abandoned. The historical reality of Middle Passage and slavery that the novel tries so painstakingly to establish as its referent becomes utterly elusive in Beloved's incantatory language at the same time that its excess of pain and loss of kin overwhelms memory. The text oscillates on two levels: it appears as the memory of the monologue's traumatized voice having lost all coherence, and as an expression of the narrative voice's desperation, who cannot/refuses to respond in narrative form: "How can I say things that are pictures?" (*Beloved* 210) Those passages figure a radical break-up of narrative sequence in the very core of the text and a strategic reduction of syntactical structure that seem to bare the narrative act to its bones, as it were. Again calling into question the very possibility of emplotment, this piece of text within/against the story seems to resist what *Beloved* at the same time frantically tries to represent, and it refuses to match the novel's restorative thrust. The rhythmical passages circling back on themselves, leading nowhere, function in the novel like the outer limit of its crisis.

The second trauma is the result of a deed the responsibility for which may not be displaced: the child's death at Sethe's handsaw is a literal killing off of the future, which Sethe as a free subject ultimately, in ethical terms, cannot call upon her own victimization to justify. That act of murder stands for—but may precisely not "represent"—the real of limitless, nameless, terror. So that a writer may surrealistically gesture at it as Morrison does in Beloved's monologues, but story, in the sense of emplotted cultural memory, cannot reach it.

Years ago, Hortense Spillers<sup>24</sup> has presented African-American Studies with the far-reaching insight that instead of claiming patriarchal lineage the African-American community has been built on a legacy of rupture, absence and loss of generational succession which is what Beloved's incantations conjure up rather appropriately—in a manner defying the laws of syntax, semantics and narrative proper. Between Sethe's "No. No. NoNo. Nonono," the indeed *incoherent* fragments of terrorized and terrorizing memories of mother-loss, child-abandonment and murder in the monologue and the "just weather" which remains *past, in excess of the plot*, the real of Middle Passage and slavery becomes addressed but *not* redeemed - as something which might be encircled, but *not* worked through.

In its effects, *Beloved* could be called its own "truth and reconciliation" - committee: tarrying with the negative, it at the same time reconfigures a social reality with African-American subjects *in it*.<sup>25</sup> *Beloved* re-possesses and re-nationalizes the African-American woman and her community as victim-survivor in the Sethe/Denver constellation at the same time that it subverts any teleological kitsch optimism by its own excess. This latter point, however, has fallen prey to considerable oversight or interested indifference within the novel's critical environment. What *Beloved* does is create a post haunted African-American community as a historical self, a subject in possession of memory, a subject able to negotiate society on its own terms but beyond that, it is wise enough to leave the excess of the historical real in place, to write, as it were, "against itself." Many of the novel's enthusiastic readers, however, have chosen not to confront this ambiguity—an attitude which Morrison seems to have expected to the extent that she prefigured it in her coda's final admonition that who has claim "is not

<sup>24</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", 1987.

<sup>25</sup> See Jenny Edkins's probing discussion of trauma, violence and the momentum of the political in Edkins, *Trauma*, and Huyssen, *Present Pasts*.

claimed." (*Beloved* 274) The community which will have forgotten *Beloved* might include the implied reader who ignores the text's excess, reads for the plot *only*. That the novel is characterized by a deep ambiguity in terms of its structure (plot versus unplotted fragments), its protagonists (realist and surrealist), its language (mimetic syntax versus semiotic ruptures), and its ethical and aesthetic claim to address historical trauma (as curable by narrativization or as excessive to it), is a challenge which has been met with surprising critical neglect in favor of following *Beloved's* and its author's lure in readerly identificatory desire.

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