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## 25 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

**Abstract:** Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is widely considered her highest literary achievement. Although it met with mixed reactions when it was first published, it was also regarded as a masterpiece early on and remains a key text of American literature. The controversy it stirred had to do with the subject matter of the book, namely the retelling of the slave experience from an African American viewpoint. Based on historical sources and material traces of the slave system, *Beloved* is about a run-away slave, Sethe, who kills one of her daughters when she is tracked down by slavecatchers. The novel takes this incident as the narrative nucleus around which the imaginative exploration of the dehumanizing and traumatizing effects of slavery revolve. Interweaving various timeframes, multiple perspectives, and evocative metaphors, *Beloved* is a novel about how memory can haunt the present and disrupt a community, and it asks whether regeneration is possible in the light of horrible historical experiences.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; memory; trauma; African American literature

### 1 Context

Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, Toni Morrison has devoted most of her life to writing and now stands as one of the most prolific and influential American authors of her time. Her books have been translated into many languages and speak to a broad general readership and literary critics alike. In academia, her works have been approached from manifold perspectives and have long been included in syllabuses and literature courses in schools and universities. Through her writing, Toni Morrison has repeatedly functioned as a cultural critic and commentator and has, beside her role as a fiction writer, worked as a teacher, editor, and scholar. Her many achievements have won her innumerable prizes and honors, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She has also been awarded the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American letters at the 1996 National Book Award. In 2012 President Barack Obama honored her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Furman 2014, 1–3).

Morrison's career is illustrious, yet it had not been entirely foreseeable. She was born into a poor African American family that had migrated from the South to Lorain, Ohio, a small Rust Belt town (Smith 2012, 8–15; Roynon 2013a, 1–11). An avid reader and quick learner, Morrison was the only African American student in her first-grade class. Surrounded by a culturally diverse and racially heterogeneous environment,

Morrison was confronted with cultural contacts as well as conflicts early on. Her name, Toni, may derive from this time as either a Roman Catholic baptismal name (St. Anthony) or a nickname. She was the first member of her family to go to college. At Howard University, she majored in English and minored in Classics and at Cornell she received a master's degree in 1955. Various teaching positions led her back to Howard where she met the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison. They married and have two sons, but were divorced after a troubled marriage in 1964. She eventually moved to New York, where she first worked as senior editor for the textbook publisher L. W. Singer and later for Random House. Here, she came into contact with many contemporary authors and became influential in the publication of African American writing, including anthologies, textbooks, novels, as well as autobiographies of cultural figures like Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali. During that time, Morrison took her first steps as an author, devoting more and more time to her own creative endeavors. It would take more than a decade, however, before writing proved to be a possible career path and her works met with commercial as well as critical success.

These troublesome years notwithstanding, some of the key subjects, narrative symbols, structures, and sociocultural concerns of her work can be found as early as 1970, when her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* was published. The novel deals with normative sets of culturally imposed understandings of race and gender and how they come to bear on the psychology of socially marginalized groups. Pecola Breedlove, the young African American protagonist of the novel, pursues idealized standards of white beauty (she longs for the blue eyes that the title invokes), which leads to conflicts within the disenfranchised black community. Alienated from their African heritage and suffering from self-loathing, which white hegemony and slavery have instilled in them, its members project their trauma on young Pecola, who is expelled by the end of the novel. Marked by a complex narrative structure and interweaving multiple time layers, *The Bluest Eyes* makes use of a nonlinear approach that demands a lot of the recipient, who has to constantly work to make meaning of the story. The disruptive chronology and polyphonic viewpoints which can be found in her novels attest to Morrison's interest in how history is told and how marginalized historical experiences can be retold. Most of her novels problematize intergenerational and cross-cultural conflicts between different groups within society but also between individuals and their communities. A constant backdrop is the presence of African American life and culture within the predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon cultural frameworks of the United States.

Especially slavery, racism, and their (often traumatic) heritage are recurrent themes in her novels, which can be said to revisit important moments in American history. Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* (1973) is set in a small town and deals with racial conflicts in the wake of the Great Depression. The partly autobiographic *Song of Solomon* (1977) was Morrison's first literary success and is a family epic that spans multiple generations from slavery to the Civil Rights era, exploring how African American identities have been constructed with regard to changing sociohistorical con-

texts. *Tar Baby* (1982), although for the most part set outside the United States, deals with similar questions, looking at how capitalistic forces and processes of displacement affect individuals and their cultural identity. The novels *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997) are often seen as a trilogy – not only because they span (read consecutively) one hundred years, but also because they are bound together by the motifs of limitless love and touch on African American experiences that, although they had long-lasting socio-psychological effects, have not found the expression they deserve. Together, they embody what Morrison has referred to as her “literary archaeology” (1995, 92), that is, the recovery of obscure historical sources and the imaginative reworking of traumatic experiences through the medium of literature. Her subsequent novels *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012) all share in this literary project and deal with issues of colonization, social deprivation, and personal loss against the background of diverse historical settings. Next to her novelistic work, Morrison has also (co-)authored children’s books (together with her deceased son Slade) and operas, written numerous analytic essays on issues of canonicity and literary world-making, and (co-)organized various exhibitions that deal with questions of remembering and storing the past.

In so vast a career and a work that is characterized by a high degree of interconnection, it may be hard to pick out one novel which epitomizes a whole literary life. And yet, in the case of Morrison, the choice is an obvious one. No work has drawn more attention and critical praise than her landmark 1987 novel *Beloved*. The novel tells the story of Sethe, a former slave girl, who has fled, together with her four children, from a slave plantation in Kentucky to Ohio. When her former masters come to reclaim herself and her children as their property, she kills her infant daughter and wounds the other three children in an attempt to save them from slavery. Although Sethe sees her murder as an act of love, she is convicted to prison and shunned by the predominantly black community once she is released. Living with her youngest daughter Denver in a house haunted by the ghost of her dead baby girl, she is visited by the former slave Paul D. His arrival sets in motion a train of events that leads to the resurfacing of past memories and the confrontation with traumatic experiences. They come in the embodied form of a young woman, Beloved, who is understood by most readers to be the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter and a symbol of the unnamed victims of slavery. Her presence eventually leads to a reconsideration of the moral implications of Sethe’s deed and the question of whether communal notions of guilt truly hold within the social frameworks of racial repression and collective traumatization. In this context, *Beloved* can be seen as a historical novel as well as “a drama of interior consciousness” (Hill 2011, 1077), as a text that is concerned with reimagining the physical realities of the slave experience as well as its long-term psychological effects.

Often perceived as Morrison’s highest literary achievement, *Beloved* stands as the most important contemporary American novel about slavery. It won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and in 2006 it was named as the best novel published in the last 25

years in a poll in the *New York Times*. Although it extensively deals with the historical contexts of slavery and the Reconstruction years, including the Civil War, commentators have repeatedly underlined that it is a work as much about the present as it is about the past. Questions of female autonomy and resilience loom large in the novel, while motherhood is perceived in its personal as well as social meanings. This reflects an interest in the role of gender – a strand of academic and political discussion that was prevalent when Morrison wrote her text. Moreover, *Beloved* explicitly deals with how the historical experience of slavery can be written about under the sign of the present. While it does not deny that slavery was a historical reality and has to be regarded in all of its cultural, economic, and social dimensions, it nevertheless shows a reluctance to treat the past as mere fact. This stems, in part, from a postmodern ambivalence regarding the question of whether the past can be treated and narrated objectively (↗ 2 Postmodernism). For Morrison, this question is intertwined with political aspects. On the one hand, the novel explicitly deals with the issue of race and racial repression – subjects that are of great importance in a post-Civil Rights environment in which African Americans are still marginalized and made the victims of social stigmatization. On the other hand, it explores the role that the past in general and slavery in particular have for present understandings of African American citizenship. By imaginatively uncovering the interior effects of a system based on dehumanization and racist ideology, Morrison illustrates the subconscious and hidden presence of the trauma of slavery in American society. As she has put it, her goal was to lift “a veil drawn over” the wounds of the past so that the physical and psychological violence of slavery could be made visible and thematized in a sociocultural context that was reluctant to see the all-encompassing dimension of the slave system (1995, 91).

Against this background, Morrison also revisited historical sources. That the novel takes its basic fabric from a real historical event has often been noted. When Morrison, during her time as an editor for Random House, was working on a collection of obscure African American memorabilia, journal entries, photographs, and other material called *The Black Book* (Harris 2009), she encountered a newspaper article entitled “A Visit to the Slave-Mother Who Killed Her Child.” The article was from 1856 and told the story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who killed one of her four children when they were captured in Ohio. Morrison took this single source as testimony of a historical incident that, to her, epitomized the slave experience. For although she has underlined the influence that African American writings have had on her work, she has also criticized the reluctance in these writings to fully disclose the brutality of slavery to a broad, predominantly white readership. In this context, Morrison explicitly evokes the tradition of the slave narrative: accounts by former slaves that told about their experiences in the system and that were used for political means by the abolition movement and during the Reconstruction period. While these narratives managed to give an insight into the terrible workings of the institution of slavery, they were, for the most part, silent about its violent and dehumanizing

effects. Since these aspects were omitted from many historical accounts of slavery, Morrison conceptualized her text as a kind of counter-history that was meant to fill in the blanks in the collective memory (Rody 2000, 85–89). And because she could not draw on actual sources that would help her in reconstructing the actual slave experience, she had to imaginatively reinvent it with the help of innovative aesthetic and formal strategies that establish the magisterial status of *Beloved*.

## 2 Close Reading

Like its central character *Beloved*, the novel is a shape-shifting text that at once puzzles and amazes. It is a historical novel, a family tragedy, and a multilayered, fragmented exploration into the deep structures of historical time and memory. It is structured in three parts, all of which are marked by different moods, interlocking motifs and narrative techniques, as well as changing relationships between its main characters. Set in Cincinnati in a predominantly black neighborhood and stretching from 1873 to 1874, the action of the novel takes place in a post-Civil War environment in which people are trying to come to terms with a painful past and an uncertain future. Slavery has officially ended, but for the people living in this community, it is still very much present. Their daily lives are marked by routine, yet they are primarily concerned with “beating back the past” (86). Scarred by physical abuse and traumatized by the psychological terror and humiliation of slavery, the characters of the novel struggle to deal with the ghosts of the past and to leave them behind for good. For Sethe, the novel’s protagonist, this has a double meaning. She is tormented by traumatic memories that go back to 1855, when she was a young slave mother on the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky. After a sudden change in the supervision of the farm, she was abused by the cruel slaveholder Schoolteacher and his nephews. As a consequence, she sent her three children to their paternal grandmother, Baby Suggs, in Cincinnati and tried to flee together with her fellow slaves. Her husband, Halle, who has been missing ever since, and the others are either captured or killed. Only Sethe makes it out of Sweet Home and barely survives her flight, since she gives birth to her daughter Denver on the way. She names her for a white teenage vagrant who helps her through labor. She enjoys 28 days of freedom with her children at Baby Suggs’ house at 124 Bluestone Road, but is eventually hunted down by slave catchers. In order to spare her children the fate of slavery, she tries to kill them, and is sentenced to prison for infanticide. Ever since this event, which resulted in the death of one of her daughters, she has been shunned by the community and the house where she lives is haunted by the ghost of her dead baby. Here, she is left alone with Denver as her two boys run away and Baby Suggs gives in to grief and dies. With Sethe left to her memories and to social abandonment, time has literally stopped at Bluestone Road until Paul D, the sole survivor of the male Sweet Home slaves, arrives and relates

his own experiences of eighteen years of captivity, escapes, and the time when he “worked both sides of the War” (315).

Part One of the novel narrates these events mostly in flashbacks, chronological leaps, and stories that are told from the characters’ perspectives. Since their memories are painful and hard to put into words, most of the information is disclosed only slowly, in bits and pieces that are by and by assembled into a coherent whole. In the course of the novel, it becomes clear that the characters are psychologically wounded by what they have been through and their conversations about the past are as much concerned with “keeping [it] at bay” (51) so as to spare them new pain as they are with soothing old traumas. In the beginning of the novel, Paul D’s arrival sets in motion a process in which both aspects of memory surface and constantly work to comment on and undermine each other. Paul D, the “walking man”, arrives to find Sethe with bloody legs from chamomile bushes that surround the house and grow by the stream. Chamomile is traditionally used as a healing plant and the interrelation between wounds and the power to heal is made apparent right from the beginning. Paul D will also sing a “chamomile” song when he comes back to “124” at the novel’s end to save Sethe from being consumed by her own sense of guilt, loss, and abandonment. In between, the characters go through an emotional tour de force that has them questioning the boundaries of love and the conditions of selfhood in the face of a past that is at once “unspeakable” (235) and “unaccounted for” (323). Paul D and Sethe make love in the kitchen shortly after his arrival and he drives out the ghost that has haunted the house for too long. Their memories of “Sweet Home” bind them together, but their communion comes under increasing stress when a “fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (60). She declares that her name is “Beloved” and is nursed by Sethe and Denver, who grows especially fond of her and recognizes her as the sister that had been killed. In the meantime, Paul D is displaced, seduced by Beloved, and he finally leaves the house when he learns of Sethe’s killing her child through an old “newspaper clipping” that Stamp Paid, a former slave who helps fugitive slaves over the Ohio River, shows him (181–186). Part Two sees the women struggling for and over one another. Whereas Denver watches her mother suspiciously, afraid that she may kill her daughter yet again, Beloved clings to Sethe and attaches herself to her in a way that leaves no room for any other social contacts or for self-care. Sethe, in turn, tries to compensate for the murder and, because of her sense of guilt, completely surrenders to the needs of Beloved. Part Three, the shortest section of the novel, shows how the women have become physically taken over by their relationship. While Beloved “was getting bigger” (285) and resembles a pregnant woman in the end, Sethe’s state deteriorates dramatically. Denver, who is afraid for their lives and fears that they might starve, eventually seeks help in the community. The black women supply “124” with food and finally assemble in its yard, where through communal song and prayer they exorcise Beloved and keep Sethe from attacking Mr. Bodwin, her landlord and a former abolitionist, whom in her hallucinations she mistakes for Schoolteacher.



Like a musician using the verbal cue of a count-off or lead-in before a song, Morrison makes the numerical sequence “124” the opening word of the novel. Read in order, the missing (or silent) number “3” points ahead to the fragmentary nature of the narrative that is about to unfold. As a compound, the number designates the setting of the novel, a house on Bluestone Road formerly owned by the freed Baby Suggs. The “blues” that the address invokes hints at the sadness that this place encloses and at the long tradition of African American music and tonality, which is also connected to Paul D, who likes to sing his troubles and finds the house through walking. Each part of the novel begins with the same count-off. Yet each time the underlying mood is a different one. At first, “124 was spiteful” (3), then “loud” (199), and finally “quiet” (281). This triad sets the tone of the novel and is ultimately puzzling, because we learn that the house is really possessed by a presence or spirit. The elliptic second sentence of the novel, “Full of a baby’s venom” (3), invokes the source of the house’s activity and yet the reader has to make meaning of what has happened there before the ultimate subject of the book is fully disclosed. As Morrison herself has put it, this abrupt opening into her novel – and into the house – is supposed to bewilder the reader, “who is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign.” As she further explains, “I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another” (1988, 32). Slavery is the primary thematic concern of *Beloved*. However, this subject is defamiliarized right at the beginning. A house haunted by the ghost of a murdered baby is more evocative of a horror story than a historical novel. But this play with genre conventions and aesthetic strategies is for Morrison a way of evading the pitfalls of the endeavor to recreate a believable historical world that can in some way convey the illusion of being able to realistically render the experience of slavery. Hers is a world of suspense, sense, and wonder, where multiple (historical) worlds exist right next to each other. Colors, smells, and sounds loom large in the novel, and the sensual impression they leave with the characters act as imaginative corridors that take them back to different times and places. The entrance to the house is bathed in “a pool of red and undulating light” (10), and whenever Sethe feels the “cool of unchiseled headstones” (5) under her bare feet, it involuntarily takes her back to when she slept with the engraver to pay him for writing the name “Beloved” on the grave of her dead baby. Her knees bled afterwards, just like the baby whose throat she had cut. It is a memory that works through the body and the senses and that cannot be controlled by any cognitive impulse. In the same vein, Baby Suggs is unable to remember her eight children, who had been taken away from her when she was still a slave.

In order to capture the fleeting, instable, and unreliable nature of remembering the past, Morrison coins the term “rememory.” In *Beloved* the term is used both as a noun (43) and as a verb (226). On the one hand, it designates an individual capacity, which cannot be fully controlled. When Sethe runs toward a water pump, the feeling of “the breeze” cooling her skin brings her back to Sweet Home, the plantation where

she had worked as a slave (6). The environmental memory triggers an image of the plantation “rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty” (7). Sethe feels guilty of her memory because she remembers the natural beauty of the place rather than the slave boys who had been hung from trees there. It leads her to conclude that her “brain was devious” (6). However, it is not quite as simple. For “rememory” also has, on the other hand, a collective or interpersonal dimension. Thus, Sethe warns Denver that she might “bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” and that the past may repeat itself, because the mental images of a place have an indexical relationship to the real world: “The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again” (43–44). Rememory is at once present in the minds of the characters and a relic of the past that is not attached to an individual but rather “stands outside the subject” (Raynaud 2007, 56). The fear of consciously remembering slavery is connected to Sethe’s fear of losing her children to a system that she has barely survived. Rememory, then, is the omnipresence of the past in the deeper structures of reality from where it can enter the characters’ consciousness and lives at any time (Zapf 2002, 163–164). And although Sethe is reluctant to open herself to the past, the conversations with Paul D are a first step in partaking in a communicative form of memory that is painful but also therapeutic. It leads them back to a time before Sweet Home, when Sethe was raised on a slave plantation and was breastfed by a woman called Nan while her mother was working in the fields. “Of that place where she was born [...] she remembered only song and dance” as well as a “language [...] which would never come back” (37, 74). These are glimpses of a diasporic memory that leads all the way back to Africa and underlines the transgenerational as well as transnational quality of rememory. When Sethe discloses to Paul D that Schoolteacher and his nephews “took my milk” (19–20), Paul D tells her that her husband had witnessed the scene and later sat “by the churn”, smearing “butter all over his face” (82). Although Paul D wished to help him at the time, he was unable to do so because he “had a bit in my mouth” (82), an instrument of torture that degraded and dehumanized him.

The shared narrative that the process of rememory incites is thus a way of uncovering the traumatic traces of the past and the psychological wounds that slavery instilled in its victims. Yet, there is also a story which counters the violence and desperation found in the novel. At various instances throughout the narrative, the story of Denver’s birth offers a hopeful backdrop to the trauma of the past. Like an object that she can enter, the past “lay before her” (36). It tells about her miraculous birth (connected, like *Beloved*’s resurrection, to the element of water) with the help of a white girl and becomes a collaborative act of love and storytelling: “Denver spoke, *Beloved* listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened” (92). The interactive quality of storytelling is central to Morrison’s work in general and implicitly points to the relationship between text and reader. *Beloved* self-consciously



uses multiple narrative voices and repeatedly disrupts the chronology of the story so that the recipient constantly has to work to fuse the different narrative strands to make meaning of the story. We, too, “create what really happened.” This can also be seen in the central episode of the book: Sethe’s killing of her baby. While the act itself is never explicitly described, its circumstances and effects are rendered at different points and from different perspectives throughout the novel. First, in an evocation of images of the apocalypse as related in the biblical Book of Revelations, the actions are described from the perspective of the “four horsemen” (174) that come to reclaim Sethe and her children. While the slavecatchers’ perspective underlines her brokenness and wildness, there is also an official account of the episode, stored in a newspaper account. The newspaper clipping that Stamp Paid, who witnessed the scene, reads to Paul D is presented as historical testimony of the deed. In this sequence, the novel “moves on to a strategy of revelatory ‘not-telling’” (Roynon 2013a, 51) as Paul D questions the authority of the article and the picture that had been taken of Sethe, simply stating “that ain’t her mouth” (186). When he finally questions Sethe about what she has supposedly done, she at first evades him, moving “round and round the room” (187) while “circling the subject” (189). She then explains her reaction as an internal impulse, which she metaphorically compares to “little hummingbirds” (192) peeking her: as motherly instinct rather to see her children dead than in slavery. By language alone, “she could never explain” (192), and neither does the novel, which does not pass judgment on her action. Quite the contrary: together with the fragments of rememory, these passages disrupt the idea of one authoritative narrative voice. The past is never over and done with, but rather an instable and dynamic realm that can be told from different angles and that is open to renegotiation. This is also a call for revisiting aspects of slavery that had thus far not been dealt with in the public discourse and for reassessing the moral implications of Sethe’s deed against the background of an inhuman historical context.

The problematization of narrative truth and the idea of judgment are connected to a questioning of the capacity of language to render past trauma. The characters at times appear as ghostly presences themselves. Paul D is “a man with an immobile face” (9) and Sethe’s “face” is “too still for comfort,” resembling “a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes” (10). They bear physical traces of their pasts, which have also reached into their interior lives. Paul D compares his heart to a “tobacco tin buried in his chest” (86), where all of his painful memories are locked. Like Sethe, he has repeatedly been (sexually) assaulted and violated and is scarred by the experience. On her back, Sethe wears scars that stem from horrible whippings by Schoolteacher and his nephews. They are at once compared to a “wrought-iron maze” (25) and “a chokecherry tree” (18). The innovative language and imaginatively rich and evocative metaphors are a distinctive feature of *Beloved*’s aesthetic and add to the emotional impact of the story, since moments of beauty and horror are constantly interchanged. The deprivatized medium of fiction is thereby used to give expression to what could otherwise not be told. The fragmentary narrative structure and disrupted chronology

add to this impression. They find their clearest articulation in Part Two of the novel during a series of stream-of-consciousness sections which give insight into the inner life of the women of “124” and dissolve into an open narrative pattern:

in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me I am small I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth he sang through his singing was soft his singing is of the place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket (250)

In these sections, Morrison is both concerned with disrupting meaning and narrative coherence and with reimagining the Middle Passage, the transport of captured Africans from their homes into the “New World” on slave ships. This part of the novel transcends the narrative timeframe and geography of the story and becomes a meditation on the communal trauma of slavery. The motifs of song, flowers, and love point back to the beginning of the narrative and evoke a forgotten, distant past, a memory of a home long lost. The characters’ personal stories are here related to the collective experience of slavery as an act of displacement. The motif of water and the interplay between memory and forgetting, which can be seen as the novel’s guiding structural principle, are again taken up in the enigmatic epilogue. The epilogue is a beautiful and at the same time sad rumination on loss. It mourns the death of *Beloved*, whose fate it connects to that of the slaves who died during the Middle Passage and who have left no traces that can be visited or claimed. The ambivalence of a sentence that is repeated three times, once in the present tense (“This is not a story to pass on”, 323–324), points to the need of remembering the dead in order to do justice to their fate and of forgetting the horrors of the past in order to be able to live on.

### 3 Theoretical Perspectives

One can safely say that the publication of *Beloved* marked a watershed moment in Morrison’s own career and in contemporary American literature. By then, there were practically no monograph studies or collections of essays solely devoted to her work (Royon 2013a, 114–125). In the same vein, the Civil War and slave culture were in danger of becoming romanticized, with the fall of the Old South being compared to a tragedy (107). Published just before the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent breakdown of polarized world views, *Beloved* arrived at a time when the American nation was reconsidering the pillars of its identity and history. Cultural memory, which is concerned with storing key moments of the past for present uses of remembering and identity formation, has therefore also a strong political immediacy and significance, as the reception of *Beloved* illustrated. The novel’s rewriting of the past

and its uncovering of marginalized black experiences largely left out of dominant representations of United States history caused an uproar among the American public. More than a fictional text concerned with imagination, Morrison's novel has, since its publication, also been understood as a political statement. Upon its release, reactions were mixed. While some criticized her book for what was seen as a reactionary and false portrayal of the atrocities of slavery, others praised the novel as a masterpiece early on, celebrating its poetic language and imaginative power to transcend historical time and experience. In a now infamous review in the *New Republic*, Stanley Crouch disqualified *Beloved* as a "blackface holocaust novel" (126). His remark was directed as much against the book as against the author: Toni Morrison has often been faced with the challenge of withstanding racialized prejudices regarding her person. In many ways, the initial reactions to her novel confirmed her own views about the cultural memory of slavery and the role of African American writing in the United States. In her essay *Playing in the Dark* (1993), Morrison explores the role that African Americans and racialized images of "blackness" have played in American cultural (and especially literary) history. On the one hand, she shows how national and predominantly white Eurocentric traditions have constructed themselves with the image of an "other" (the "Negro") in mind; on the other hand, she illustrates in what way this "other" has been present in canonized texts of American literature – even where it is not explicitly thematized. Her essay uncovers the dark undercurrents of United States history and public discourse alike, and her novel *Beloved* openly challenges hegemonic views of slavery. Yet, rather than opting for a revisionist account of history, Morrison is more concerned with unveiling the subconscious and implicit traumas embedded in official narratives about the past. As Caroline Rody puts it, "by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, [*Beloved*] portrays that 'interior' place in the African American psyche where a slave's face still haunts" (2000, 90).

Against this background, it is no surprise that the theoretical perspectives on the author and her work are broad and encompass various strands of contemporary academic discourse. And although she is primarily seen as an author of fiction, it is interesting to note that Morrison herself has predetermined some of these strands through her theoretical essays. Next to the problematization of social categories like race or gender and their influence on the literary tradition, memory looms large in Morrison's writings. In "The Site of Memory," she points out that "blacks" or "marginalized" groups were "historically [...] seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" (1995, 91). She discusses slave narratives as a form of writing that, although it had been written by blacks, was very much in line with the standards and public tastes sanctioned by the general white audience. Since "there was no mention of their [i.e. slaves'] interior life," she perceives her own "job" as an exercise in "[ripping] that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (91). She attributes to literary world-making its own explanatory potential and responsibility in the face of history. Accordingly, the traditional distinction between "fact and fiction" does not hold in her view – rather, the representation of the past is a question of "fact or truth"

(93) for her and her writings are concerned with reproducing past events in a language that explores the experiential foundation of history. Slavery may not have left behind accounts that really allow a glimpse into the psychological effects it instilled, and yet they are still there. *Beloved* is about reclaiming these traces and remembering the silent victims of slavery. In this context, the epigraph of the novel (“Sixty million and more”) has often been interpreted as invoking those who were taken from their homes in Africa and who died on their way over the Atlantic. In “reconceiving the historical novel as memorial” (Rody 2000, 89), *Beloved* becomes itself “a site of memory”, “a place of commemoration [...] which counters social amnesia and fills in the blanks of cultural memory” (Schliephake 2012, 109). While these approaches place her work in public discourse and perceive it in its political dimensions (Peterson 2001), other scholars underline its psychological depth and see it as an imaginative exploration of the effects of trauma on individuals and their communities (Schreiber 2010; Baillie 2013). Psychoanalytic readings thus stress how the text recreates the traumatic experience of displacement and dehumanization through its employment of narrative disruption and fragmentation, and how it strives for coherence by entering into a dialogue with its recipients who have to actively interpret and make meaning of the story (Christiansë 2013). These readings broach far-reaching questions and concerns and illustrate how literature can itself be seen as an ethical enterprise which interacts with its sociocultural contexts (Zapf 2002).

The dialogic principle that is constitutive of much of Morrison’s work also applies to her examination of literary, oral, and folkloristic traditions – all of which can be found in *Beloved* and have been dealt with extensively in academic discourse. Because of its attention to spoken language and vernacular expressions and the room it gives to polyvocal narration, *Beloved* can almost be described as a text that asks to be read out aloud. The connection between storytelling, listening, and memory is openly thematized in the novel, and reimagining the past by simulating the fragmentary and instable nature of memory processes becomes the text’s self-conscious task. However, the significance of spoken dialogue is not solely an aesthetic strategy of the text, but also shows Morrison’s interest in African American communicative memory. African ancestral culture had mostly been lost or eradicated during slavery, so that African Americans came up with their own strategies of preserving their origins and of dealing with oppression. Songs, dances, and mythical stories as well as communal rituals are repeatedly invoked in the novel to point to a predominantly performative culture outside of written discourse. A good example are the spiritual communions that Baby Suggs conducts in the Clearing behind “124.” They are presented as important for the cohesion of the black community living in Cincinnati, as a way of revitalizing life energies (Zapf 2002, 163–168). Against this background, scholars have shown how Morrison incorporates the belief systems and rituals of African cultures into her novel (Jennings 2008). This is her way of countering the Eurocentric writing traditions of the United States with an alternative image of black culture, highlighting the richness of its expressions and the complexity of its meanings. While Morrison is

thus clearly interested in the survival and presence of African elements in American culture, she is also concerned with entering into a dialogue with her literary forebears and with various literary traditions. While William Faulkner has served as an especially popular reference point (which might have to do with the fact that Morrison wrote her M. A. thesis about him; Kolmerten 1997), recent studies have outlined the presence of the classical tradition in Morrison's novels (Walters 2007; Roynon 2013b). More than a mere exploration of intertextual motifs or narrative structures (*Beloved's* composition shows parallels to Greek tragedy, and the name Sethe invokes an Egyptian deity), these studies are concerned with showing how Morrison's imaginative world-making spans centuries and continents (cf. Tally 2009). The latter aspect has implications for her status as a preeminent American author, because her work is increasingly seen in its transnational scope (Gilroy 1993; Rice 2003). Morrison indeed questions and challenges normative categories like "nation" and "race," and her constant endeavor to transcend the narrow boundaries of hegemonic cultural models have garnered her work the status of "universality" (Smith 2012, 1–2). *Beloved* has long entered the canon of American literature and is attributed the status of a "Great American Novel" (Buell 2014), but in her portrayal of slavery, which spanned the "old" world and the "new," and in uncovering the human dimension of this institution, Toni Morrison speaks to everyone.

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