

**To cite this article:** Feith, Michel. "Introduction—Weaving Texts and Memories Around Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014): 3–23. Web.

**To link to this article:** <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00103772-14>

**Abstract:** In this introduction, Michel Feith problematizes the complex relation between writing and the history of slavery by focusing on two case studies that reconfigure this relation: an examination of the Memorial for the Abolition of Slavery, inaugurated in Nantes, France in 2012, and a triangulation between Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and *Lose Your Mother* (2007). What common ground seems to emerge from these two case studies—memory as a sort of compromise formation in the monument, and the varying mixes of objectivity and empathy in the texts—is a sense of haunting, accompanied by an always compromised endeavor to lay at rest the ghosts of the Middle Passage.

**Keywords:** history, memory, slavery, Toni Morrison, Saidiya Hartman

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## Introduction – Weaving Texts and Memories Around Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Most of the papers featured in this first issue were presented at an international symposium entitled *Writing Slavery after Beloved: Literature, Historiography, Criticism*, which took place on March 16 and 17, 2012 at the University of Nantes, France, in a partnership between the Centre de Recherches sur les Identités nationales et l’Interculturalité (CRINI) and the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR). A quarter of a century ago, Toni Morrison’s epochal 1987 novel engaged—to use Paul Gilroy’s phrase from *The Black Atlantic* (1993)—“a counter-culture of modernity” (1), in which the triangular trade and the commodification of Africans represented the dark side of the European and Euro-American rhetoric of Enlightenment and Progress, and displaced the discourse of the nation. It also spelled out the dire need for genuinely coming to terms with a past that continues to haunt the present. Focusing on one novel, even if it won its author the Nobel Prize for Literature, may still seem on the narrow side: part of the challenge was to pose the question of its status as a possible watershed, a paradigm shift in the representations of slavery and the slave trade, not only in the literary field, but also in historiography and Cultural Studies. Even though it would be quite a romantic illusion to believe that great books, like great men and women, singlehandedly ‘make’ history, they do reflect and inflect major trends and forces at work in their times. An emphasis on strategies of ‘re-reading’ and ‘re-writing’ was therefore an incentive to probe the different, yet complementary ways in which literature, historiography, and criticism re-inscribe the past within the framework of the present; how they dialogue with their object, as well as with each other; how they foreground textuality in its variegated forms.

In the rather intimate manner suggested by the format of a symposium, the occasion testified to the vitality of the field, since many of the more than twenty scholars from Europe and the United States in attendance were doctoral students and recent PhDs. Moreover, the time-space coordinates for the venue were particularly well-suited to the theme: Nantes

used to be the largest slave-trading port in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the inauguration of a Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery was scheduled for December 2011. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties, the inauguration was postponed until the end of March 2012, only a few weeks after the symposium. So, a modest field report from the French Atlantic seaboard might not be totally beside the point of “writing slavery after *Beloved*,” such a monument is an inscription on the city’s connective tissue, rife with meaning and silences; besides, a small quote from Toni Morrison’s novel features among the various texts on display inside the Memorial – words (not) to pass by.<sup>1</sup>

### Memory as a Compromise Formation

I must admit my first visit to the Memorial was a disappointment. After all the hype about ‘Nantes facing up to its history,’ the delay in its opening to the public, and my own ambivalent procrastination, I was perhaps bound for a let-down. The underground nature of the monument may also have its part of responsibility: the quasi-absence of surface markers leads one to expect and fear a confrontation with the unknown, the return of all forms of repressed contents. The aesthetic abstraction of the design falls short of these anticipations. Yet the project by American artists and architects Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder is not without its particular relevance.<sup>2</sup> Located at the heart of the historical city center, facing the classical fronts of the houses of ship-owners who commissioned more than 1700 trade expeditions, it is part of a “commemorative path” (“Memorial”) along the Loire River and the former harbor. Studded with about 2,000 glass plates bearing the names of slave ships sailing from Nantes, as well as of ports along the triangular trade routes, this path joins the Memorial to the Victor Schœlcher footbridge, named after the Minister who abolished slavery in the French colonies in 1848. The footbridge leads to the courthouse, the *Palais de Justice*, on the other side of the river. Thus placed under the tutelage of the principle of Justice, both Abolition and Memory stand in critical tension with the history of the city’s trading past. At the other end of the commemorative path, the Memorial itself is barely visible, except for a long wedge of glass parallel to the water’s edge, and a raised rectangle in the distance, carrying the burden of a rusty-looking, man-high plaque bearing the name of the buried monument. Once you go down either of the two flights of stairs on both ends, you realize that the Memorial is not exactly underground, but occupies a paradoxical, liminal space within the former wharf’s structure of concrete beams and cross-beams. As the two designers state it:

The transformation of a space which is currently “empty” into a “passageway” provides a link with the ground under the city of Nantes, on both sides, land and sea. Visitors to the Memorial will themselves go down “towards the sea” via a passageway which follows the 19<sup>th</sup> century quay. In some places they will find themselves hemmed in by 20<sup>th</sup> century substructures, a feeling reminiscent of the extreme confinement experienced aboard the slave ships. These areas, some discovered and some newly created, will also communicate to visitors the emotional strength of the implicit and explicit imprisonment suffered by slaves as they were housed and transported. An enormous glass plaque, set at a 45° angle as if it has been thrown through the Memorial, celebrates the enormous change represented by the abolition of slavery. (Bonder and Wodiczko)

The wooden planks of the passageway remind the visitor of the holds of ships, whereas stone-and-cement apparel at other places recalls the forts and detention centers along the coast of Africa. The hushed-up mix of a muted soundtrack and traffic noises seeping through large horizontal slits in the structure create an echo chamber, so to speak, where past and present are allowed to fuse and overlap. On the slanted glass panes are etched short quotes in English, French and Creole dealing with slavery, abolition, and their impact, hovering above an Antillean-looking archipelago composed of the dissemination of the word “Freedom” in fifty languages. To this particular *flâneur* the main shortcoming of such a lean, abstract space consists in its being a ‘cool’ medium, relying on the meditations, knowledge and emotions one brings to the place. It supports contemplation but lacks evocative power in its own right. This may help account for the supplementary room dedicated to a chronology of slavery and its abolition, with a soundtrack featuring readings of texts and music of the African diaspora. The black and red walls of this room are covered with somber, chiaroscuro renderings of African faces, over which are superimposed the words “Freedom” and “Slavery” in many languages. By a trick of acquired habit, “Freedom,” being associated with light, covers only the clearer spaces, whereas “Slavery,” by the same logic, is relegated to the heart of darkness—to borrow from Joseph Conrad: as if Enlightenment ideals were unwittingly conflated with a racial shadow.<sup>3</sup>

What seems to be missing from the Memorial is a powerful reminder of the violent, scandalous nature of slavery: possibly a more monumental, vertical element as a fit counterpoint to the low-key, meditative mood of the horizontal under-quay passage. This is a dimension that Krzysztof Wodiczko was at first not partial to, but which was considered important by local black associations (Chérel 112). Yet, the city’s urban planning specifications ruled out any elevated structure. Projects to include the nearby *Maison de la mer* (Seamen’s House) as a support for a lighthouse and freedom beacon were defeated (165). So was the proposal to raise a

bronze copy of the short-lived draft statue, made out of plaster and rusted chains, inaugurated by West Indian associations and desecrated just a week later in April-May 1998 – now exhibited in the Nantes History Museum (65). The Memorial was not supposed to be a self-sufficient architectural work: in the minds of its originators, it was to be a site for critical reflection and political intervention, inseparable from a research and pedagogical center on slavery, both in the past and present (96). Only part of that program was implemented. The local authorities preferred to create a complementarity with existing structures, like the Museum rooms dedicated to the slave trade, which may appear very tame, not to say sanitized – at least so they seemed to Prof. Sabine Broeck when she visited them – and the World Forum on Human Rights.

All in all, the Memorial embodies in its materiality and history the nature of collective memory as a compromise formation. All the actors were gathered around the project with different agendas: the artists intended to create a meditative, critical work displaying a postmodern defiance towards “grand narratives,” conflating past and present in an effort to problematize both (Chérel 102-103); West Indian associations came with a desire for the recognition of the sufferings of slavery and their specific identities (228); whereas the local authorities’ scheme was that of an integrated urban renovation, of which the Memorial was only a part, conveying the image of Nantes as a culturally active city facing up to its past and open to the world (90). What can be conceived as a relatively tame end product therefore seems both the result of the designers’ abstract aesthetic and of the progressive pruning of the work’s asperities in the negotiation process. Similarly, the quasi-subterranean nature of the Memorial can be ironically construed both as a reflection on the repressed contents of French and local history, and as a partial reenactment of such silencing strategies in the very monument that brings them to the fore. Still, the very existence of the Memorial is an achievement: there were so many reasons to sweep this history under the carpet. In a country where slavery was mainly an overseas matter, as opposed to the United States, where it was indissolubly intertwined with the fabric of national life; in a country where the more recent problems of colonization and colonial wars are controversially alive in the national memory; in a country where the ideological sway of abstract ‘Republican’ universalism often denies legitimacy to ethnic, ‘communitarian’ pressure groups – the sustained commitment of the city is to be acknowledged. The Memorial is actually the only monument of this type in France. Of course, the fact that it is being nominally dedicated not to the memory of slavery, but to its abolition – an abolition that the Nantes elite of the time staunchly opposed, in the name of its prosperity – could allow a form of consensual reinvention of local and national memories, yet the history of confrontation and compromise that

has presided over the elaboration of the work, as well as its nature as an 'empty space' to be inhabited by various actors and sensibilities, could invest it with the dialogical, democratic dimension intended by its designers. I must admit that my own attitude has progressively evolved: initial disappointment has made way for familiarity. I might not visit the Memorial often, since there is not much to *see*, but cannot remain indifferent to the fact that an uncannily disturbing reminiscence should be embedded in a seemingly innocent riverscape.

### Intertextual Passages

Abstract and minimalist though it be, a Memorial like the Nantes tribute to abolition, as an inscription in public space, becomes a platform for (re)writings of slavery: echoing on a larger scale the various excerpts etched onto the slanted glass plates, it can refer to historical accounts, negotiate identities, and foster fictions. Harboring texts, it becomes a textual space in its own right, reminding us of the contemporary tendency to treat history as text, and probe its complex relation to fiction-writing.<sup>4</sup> One only needs to remember Roland Barthes' linking of classical historiography with the aesthetics of the realist novel, or Hayden White's superimposition of the major modes of history-writing with the main literary genres. Historiography was traditionally considered a province of literature, until it claimed scientific status, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the current emphasis on its textual nature, following the 'linguistic turn' of the 1970s, represents both a questioning of its claims to 'objectivity' independently of the social, ethnic, and gender situation of its author, and a crucible for new methods and objects. Elaborating on French historian Paul Veyne's playfully provocative definition: "L'histoire est un roman vrai" – "History is a novel of true events" (10) – some critics insist on the truth dimension, while others privilege the "novel" aspect, going as far as making historiography a class of fiction, according to the adage: "There are no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche 458). Besides, let us not forget that the nature of the novel has also undergone radical metamorphoses in the modernist and postmodern eras.

The most fundamental collusion between history and textuality is not only the fact that history is written discourse, but that its very method is predicated on the existence of written documents. But not all civilizations were literate, and within any given society not everyone had equal access to the means of writing and publishing. This point is especially moot in the case of Africa, as well as in the history of slavery and the slave trade. In the course of history, Black people were often more written about than writing. In her 1997 book on American slavery and emancipation, *Scenes*

of *Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman addresses the “constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive” (11):

In other words, there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents. Accordingly, this examination of the cultural practices of the dominated is possible only because of the accounts provided by literate black autobiographers, white amanuenses, plantation journals and documents, newspaper accounts, missionary tracts, travel writing, amateur ethnographies, government reports, et cetera. (10)

To this list, one could add archaeology and oral testimonies and traditions, like those of the griots in Africa or the WPA interviews with former slaves. But even these documents are not exempt from power play or misrepresentations. Hence the necessity to “read against the grain” (Hartman, *Scenes* 10), in an attempt to get closer to the actuality of the past. The archive creates a sort of fiction about the disenfranchised, because it never directly echoes their experience and aspirations; on the other hand, this heterodox reading cannot but remain fragmentary, bridging the gaps through another form of fictionality. Yet all interpretations are not equal: especially in the case of minorities, attempts to get closer to the truth and dispel myths and prejudices are of the essence. “Therefore, while I acknowledge history’s ‘fiction of factual representation,’ to use Hayden White’s term, I also recognize the political utility and ethical necessity of historical fiction” (Hartman, *Scenes* 14). Whether the word “fiction” remains the most accurate one to describe this epistemological striving is an open question. Actually, the meaning of the phrase “historical fiction” seems to have evolved in Hartman’s textual practice, from *Scenes of Subjection* to her more recent *Lose Your Mother* (2007). The first book obeyed the scientific demands of the field: it engaged in a dialogue with post-structuralist epistemologies, proposing a Foucauldian reading of the discursive production of slave “subjects” (Hartman, *Scenes* 6), couched in rarefied, polysyllabic, and Latinate academic prose. The second book is a moving, highly-readable account of Hartman’s journey to Ghana in search of traces of the slave trade: it is a mixture of autobiography, travel narrative, historical digest, and ... fiction. As if, after writing a page of African American history, there had been a felt need to write the historian’s history, the private archaeology of an obsession with the past, which takes the shapes of a haunting and a melancholy. Given these characteristics of Hartman’s experiments with the writing of history, a triangulation between *Scenes of Subjection*, *Lose your Mother*, and *Beloved* may reward us with a few insights into the complex relations between the fictional and academic writings of history.

Toni Morrison came across the Margaret Garner case – which provided the starting-point for *Beloved* – during her work on *The Black Book* (1974), a major publisher's attempt at expanding and popularizing the archive about African American history. It also represented an innovative historiographical enterprise, since it associated scholarly articles with photographs of documents, belonging both to the traditional province of the discipline (newspaper articles, congressional bills, advertisements for slave sales) and artifacts from popular culture representing a folk history of Afro-American identity and American racism (coon songs, hair-straighteners and skin-whiteners, jazz and blues partitions). Besides crossing the line between high and low cultures, the volume yoked together history and memory, the 'objectivity' of science and the political, ethical or emotional charge of the testimony. Its kaleidoscopic nature also brought to attention the partial, biased nature of the archive, the impossibility to make up a totalizing story out of the different perspectives and many silences.

*Beloved* shares with the classic historical novel an emphasis on everyday life, on the recreation of the past as it was lived by the common people who did not usually make their way into history books. Who could be more outside history than the slave subalterns, or the peonized freedmen of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – except when they become the heroes of spectacular, sensational news items, like the Garner infanticide case? As Saidiya Hartman notes: "The slave was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability; ironically the slave's will was acknowledged only as it was prohibited or punished" (*Scenes* 82). Imagination allows us to bridge the gap between past and present, and the adoption of black people's points of view is one way to redress discursive absences in the writing of history. But of course the projection of a novelistic ethos onto our understanding of history is fraught with dangers: the teleological, reconciliatory trend of the romance-plot of the traditional historical novel, as initiated by Walter Scott, is disturbingly close to the "grand narratives" of Progress or Emancipation which, according to Jean-François Lyotard (15), presided over our understanding of the sense of history before the postmodern moment. As a matter of fact, the common ethos discernible in both of Saidiya Hartman's books is an attempt at historical lucidity through the shattering of the romantic illusions and shibboleth catchphrases connected with these epic grand narratives. The Foucauldian methodology of *Scenes of Subjection* attempts to demonstrate how the identity of the slave – and later, the freedman – was produced by a convergence of discourse formations, ranging from minstrel shows, novels, and travel narratives to state laws, Supreme Court rulings and even, to a certain extent, abolitionist pronouncements. These discourses abetted or justified violence against black

people, to the point that they may be qualified as exerting a form of violence themselves. The intended result of this indissoluble collusion between discourse and practice was to deprive African Americans of agency, to spell subjectivity as subjection (Hartman, *Scenes* 4). The most radical questioning of the book is that of the opposition between slavery and freedom as entirely distinct periods in American history: liberal individualism is depicted as almost equally coercive as the master's discipline: "Ironically, the liberty of contract forged the link between slavery and freedom not only because it provided the fiction of free exchange that enabled debt-bondage but also because it prescribed terms of social interaction that reproduced master-slave relations and greatly regulated the personal and private lives of free laborers" (147). But the mainstream 'grand narratives' of Progress and Emancipation are not the only ones to be invalidated: African American myths of revolutionary resistance (55), "the romance of community" (60), and continuity with Africa (74) are also put to the test: all unanimist discourses, because of their abstractedness, distort the liminal, fragmented, infra-political strategies of adaptation and resistance in the quasi-totalitarian regime of the plantation. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, this method of analysis diverts attention from the 'macro'- to the 'micro'-level:

The importance of the concept of practice is that it enables us to recognize the agency of the dominated and the limited and transient nature of that agency. The key features of practice central to this examination of the agency of the enslaved are the nonautonomy of the field of action; provisional ways of operating within the dominant space; local, multiple, and dispersed sites of resistance that have not been strategically codified or integrated; and the nonautonomy and pained consciousness of the slave person. (Hartman, *Scenes* 61)

Would it be too bold to say that this emphasis on "small acts" (Gilroy)<sup>5</sup> is a step towards the techniques of fiction? Since the 'linguistic turn' in the Human Sciences, the methods of textual analysis and close reading have been applied to the study of historical documents and the writing of historiography. The same defiance towards linear emplotment has been shared in the two fields, with a concomitant focus on the telling detail, the symbolic incident that keeps a halo of polysemic ambiguity. Hartman's reading of the patting juba not so much as an "index of African survivals" (*Scenes* 72), but as figure of loss anchored in the body, participates in this aesth/ethic of *différance* and indecidability.

Everyday practices are texts of dislocation and transculturation that register in their "perverse lines of origin" the violence of historical process and, in so doing, offer witness. This witnessing has little or nothing to do with the

veracity of recollection or the reliability or fallibility of memory. Of concern here are the ways memory acts in the service of redress rather than an inventory of memory. (Hartman, *Scenes* 72–73)

Such overdetermined episodes are to be found in Morrison's *Beloved*: Baby Suggs's preaching a clandestine sermon in the clearing, telling her improvised congregation to love themselves and their flesh, is a hybrid practice, mixing Christianity with African spirituality, but it is at bottom an act of healing and redress like the juba (87–89). On the other hand, the violent stealing of Sethe's milk by Schoolteacher's nephews is more traumatic to her than the whipping she received after telling on the boys (16–17). This egregious act, not likely to have been documented in history, reminds us of the particularity of individual behaviors, either of power or resistance, as opposed to the generalizations of history. Yet its symbolic and symptomatic power is multifaceted: a transposed rape, it is a reminder of the many violations of black women on plantations; a literal milking, it is connected with Schoolteacher's enumeration of the slaves' animal parts, and of the racist discourses that tried to justify slavery by getting rid of the enslaved's humanity; as a denial of Sethe's motherhood, it disrupts the continuity of generations, the bond between mother and daughter, alluding to the owner's absolute power to split slave families. One could say that the novelist strives to create 'incidents' that encapsulate the meshing of individual and collective destinies; whereas the historian should bring to her field a reader's sensitivity, in order to preserve the edge of the particular even within the claims of generalization.

*Scenes of Subjection* problematizes one major difference between its historical approach and that of fiction. Criticizing one abolitionist's sentimental rhetoric of empathy with the slaves' suffering, Hartman detects voyeurism and a form of sado-masochistic projection in the so-called humanist ethics of empathy:

The ambivalent character of empathy – more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy – as Jonathan Boyarin notes, can be located in the “obliteration of otherness” or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we “feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.” And as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead. (19–20)<sup>6</sup>

Hartman reluctantly relativizes this statement a few lines later, “not to suggest that empathy can be discarded,” but “rather to highlight the dangers of a too-easy intimacy, the consideration of the self that occurs at the expense of the slave's suffering, and the violence of identification” (20). But empathy is one of the key resources of the novel: the reader's percep-

tion and construction of characters is premised on identification and counter-identification; one identifies with the vector of desire, one empathizes with the sufferers. One of the key strategies of the African American novel is to give voice and agency to those who are usually silenced, to make them centers of consciousness. In her analysis of the cognitive and ethical dimension of literary emotions, Martha Nussbaum refers to Adam Smith's fiction of a "judicious spectator" (72), whose moral judgment and political options are most human only when guided by the types of identification and compassion shaped by novel-reading: "What the ancient pity tradition claims for epic and tragedy might now be claimed for the novel: that this complex cast of mind is essential in order to take the full measure of the adversity and suffering of others, and that this appraisal is necessary for full social rationality" (66). Applying this principle to her reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, she concludes that by adopting the character's point of view the reader is invited to transcend his or her own socially-conditioned limitations (95). Literature can therefore create 'counter-fictions' flying in the face of the fictions of discrimination, and serve as mediator in an expanding understanding of the Other. Similarly, much of the power of Morrison's *Beloved* resides in her ability to convey the horror of slavery through the horror of a mother's infanticide, as perceived by herself. Focalization, conveying the slaves' view of life, in contradistinction to the white discourses of patriarchal slavery (Mr. Garner), scientific racism (Schoolteacher), and even abolitionism (Edward Bodwin, whom Sethe mistakenly attacks at the end of her "exorcism" – 262), is invested with the power of redress. It is true that historical or commemorative discourses have to remain disjunctive, and resist the stickiness of sentimental identification that the 19<sup>th</sup> century so eagerly indulged in: they have to emphasize the Other's difference and the incommensurability of suffering. Yet without this groundwork of empathy defining a common humanity, there will not even be any attempts to consider the Other's plight and go beyond complacent narcissism. It is rather a matter of tact and degree, I guess, than a matter of essence.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, in *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman will have recourse to just these strategies, albeit in a self-conscious, problematic fashion.

As Melba Joyce Boyd remarks in this collection, Morrison did not stick to the facts of the Garner case: Margaret Garner was taken back South for good, and died a slave. Boyd goes as far as to say that in all justice, if someone had to be haunted by a ghost, it should have been the heartless owner, not the suffering mother. The first point engages more than the writer's poetic license in relation to historical fact: by focusing on an emancipated Sethe, Morrison questions the freedmen's freedom in the North, not predominantly in the political field like Hartman, but through the haunting of a collective and individual psyche by the shadows of the

past. In accordance with the Faulknerian motto, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (80), the mixture of the Gothic and Magic Realism, exemplified in the possession of the house on 124 and Beloved's return, fly in the face of the linear time of history. The fantastic, ghost-story dimension, in the tradition of Gothic American literature can serve as psychological allegory for the haunting by the slave past—even though, for Sethe, the trauma cuts even deeper. The reference to African folklore, in the form of spirits emerging from water, opens up to a cyclic view of time, or even to a metaphysical *Weltanschauung* that negates its ultimate significance altogether. It corresponds to what John Edgar Wideman defines as African Great Time: "Told countless times, countless ways, in each recounting the fabled bout happens again, not in the past but alive and present in Great Time, the always present tense of narrative where every alternative is possible, where the quick and the dead meet, where all stories are true" (62). Such timeless time is depicted in the sublime passage beginning with "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 210–213): the mysterious "I" of the text, who is indissolubly Sethe and her lost daughter, who expands in time to remember the Middle Passage in the holds of ships, and contracts again to cross the boundary between the living and the dead—another Middle Passage—and be reincarnated out of a body of water, states early on "All of it is now it is always now" (210). Yet this mythic communion can also be seen as madness, or possession, as confirmed later by Sethe and Beloved's deadly, regressive absorption into each other, until the ghost is laid to rest by the whole community, setting time flowing again, recreating a historical dimension through the containment of history. By placing the characters on both sides of the freedom divide, delineated in space by the Ohio River, and in time by the Emancipation proclamation, the novel also allegorizes the divide between the present of writing—also the ever-moving present of reading—and the era of slavery. Rather than a traditional historical novel, its blurred chronology, its numerous acts of re-remembering and forgetting, make it a work of "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 105) addressing the need for, and the impossibility of, memory. The double meaning—and double bind—of the final phrase "this is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 275) engages the African American community's complex relations with the scandal of servitude. It also reminds us that all history is written backwards, from the vantage point and uncertainties of the present: "A reading of the past, controlled though it might be by the analysis of documents, is driven by a reading of the present" ("Une lecture du passé, toute contrôlée qu'elle soit par l'analyse des documents, est conduite par une lecture du présent" —De Certeau, *Ecriture* 31). Its double simultaneous postulation is both of inheritance, and of willed distance; the implicit comparison, in *Beloved*, of history, not to Walter Benjamin's angel, but to a

needed yet dangerous wraith, edges quite closely to a psychoanalysis of the historical impulse.

In this respect, *Lose Your Mother* bears uncanny resemblance to *Beloved*, a novel which is not only quoted several times, but seems to be a major influence on Saidiya Hartman's meditation on trade history. Their common framing of the relation with the slave past in terms of a mother-daughter relationship is only the most obvious aspect of this intertextual connection. Originating as a research project on slave trade routes in Africa, the book morphed into a travelogue and autobiography, as if the historical enquiry had failed or been diverted onto a more personal plane. As in *Scenes of Subjection*, unifying myths are shattered: the "Afrotopia" (Hartman, *Lose* 19) of Pan-Africanism, the wishful projection of "mother Africa" (33) as home for the diaspora, and all *Roots*-like fantasies of homecoming are revealed as illusions. "There was not one Africa" (30): the African participation in the slave trade was a species of class warfare, in which the ruling elites hawked it over the commoners, indulging in expansionist policies to supply white slavers, and their own households; the memories of who was in servitude and who was not still create rifts in contemporary African societies; the nostalgic African American expatriates and tourists are considered with a mixture of envy and disbelief. Saidiya in Ghana—like "Marcel" in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, "Saidiya" designates the historian's literary self-portrait, a stylized, half-fictional paper being—feels like a stranger, an orphan. The culture shock exemplified by the extent of African difference from, and indifference to, the plight of the diaspora foregrounds irony as a key trope of history. One significant example of these ironies is the author's chosen first name, in Swahili the "helper" (8). It represents a rupture with African American middle-class ideals and expressed Pan-African solidarity. She later discovers that Swahili is a language "steeped in mercantilism and slave trading" (9), and that in Africa 'Saidiya' is a beggar's cry (212).

As a letter from a student on the make for sentimental tourists at the gates of Elmina Castle has it: "Because of the slave trade, you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from" (85). In a signifyin(g) riff on *Beloved*, Saidiya toys with an identification with the ghost child:

The boys addressed me as if I were the child sold across the Atlantic, as if pledges of love could mend the breach of slavery, as if errant spirits were destined to return home. They mistook me for the *kosamba*—the spirit child—who dies only to return again and again in a succession of rebirths. Because of this cycle of departure and return, exile and homecoming, demise and resurrection, the spirit child is also called the "come, go back, child." The spirit child shuttles back and forth between the worlds of the living and the dead because of the stories not passed on, the ancestors not remembered, the

things lost, and the debts not yet paid. The “come, go back, child” braves the wreckage of history and bears the burden that others refuse. (Hartman, *Lose* 56)

In spite of this disclaimer, *Lose Your Mother* is a story of paradoxical haunting. Saidiya is seized several times by psychosomatic suffering, from migraine—“All the terrible details of the slave trade thundered in my head and I spent the day battling nausea” (30)—to a feeling “akin to choking” (118) in the dungeons at Cape Coast castle.

My chest grew congested and my palms started sweating and I got light-headed [...]. The hollow inside my chest expanded. I could feel my torso bulge and distend like a corpse swelling with gasses. And the emptiness was a huge balloon expanding inside me and pressing against my organs, until I could no longer breathe and was about to explode. Five minutes back in the sunlight and I was breathing easily again. No one could discern it was just the husk and not really me. (118)

These two paroxysms are ecstasies of absence. The first one is an emotional turmoil caused by reading and imagination, a negative evocation of the victims. Then, contact with the place of their suffering fails to bring about the desired connection: “Each time it was the same. I failed to discover anything. No revenants lurked in the dungeon. The hold was stark. No hand embraced mine. No voices rang in my ears [...]. What I wanted was to feel something other than bricks and lime. What I wanted was to reach through time and touch the prisoners” (118–119). It is as if the historian were physically possessed by her failure to be possessed: an almost Gothic withdrawal syndrome brought about by the impossibility of a consummation like *Beloved*’s return. Conversely, a vibrant tribute is implicitly paid to the psychological and moral aptness of Morrison’s Magic Realist strategy.

This possession by emptiness may correspond to the fact that for African Americans, “[t]he only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was this loss, and it defined the tribe. A philosopher had once described it as an identity produced by negation” (Hartman, *Lose* 103). Because the inheritance of slavery continues to shape the contemporary United States, with its pattern of prejudices and discrimination, the trauma of the slave past is revived in each generation, and not allowed to fade. Hartman elucidates what Morrison allegorizes: the will to history is conditioned by the present, just as the present is conditioned by history: “It is only when you are stranded in a hostile country that you need a romance of origins; it is only when you lose your mother that she becomes a myth” (98). This political, collective statement also has a more intimate

resonance: the Saidiya in the text is often characterized by “mourning,” “melancholia” (16), even “despair” (130), both because of her likely failure at the impossible project of “recovering the stories of the enslaved” (16), and as a character trait revealing the private haunting behind Hartman’s historical enterprise.

*Lose Your Mother* nevertheless has an uplifting finale. In the last chapter, Saidiya visits a village in the interior, which resisted and defeated slaving empire-builders; she arrives at a realization of Africa’s plural and contested identities; spells out the need to continue the fight against all legacies and survivals of slavery; and experiences a cathartic epiphany. The latter is triggered by a song sung by young girls about those who were taken away, the diaspora: “Here it was – my song, the song of the lost tribe. I closed my eyes and I listened” (235). The eerie correspondence with Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, where Milkman Dead is similarly moved by a folk song about his fabled ancestor, heard in a remote Southern village, adds a touch of ambiguity to this striking conclusion. Anyway, listening is no effusive homecoming or ghostly possession: its healing power depends on connection through separation, not regressive fusion. Like the passage through “the entrails of power. The belly of the beast” (Hartman, *Lose* 112) in the vaults of Cape Coast castle, the initiatory journey of the book implies coming to terms with loss and disillusion, with the double bind of heritage, with a recognition that healing is in the last analysis impossible: “In the dungeon, there were remains but no stories that could resurrect the dead except the stories I invented” (116). So, to supplement the silence at the sites of memory, and the blind spot of historical documents – the vision and consciousness of the slaves – Saidiya Hartman becomes a writer of fiction. The chapter following the report on this visit to Cape Coast, entitled “The Dead Book,” is an attempt to redeem from oblivion a young slave girl who was murdered by a ship captain for refusing to dance on deck. Even though it became a *cause célèbre* of the abolitionist movement, because of an impassioned speech by William Wilberforce at the House of Commons in 1792, and the subsequent indictment – and acquittal – of the captain, “[a] few lines from a musty trial transcript are the entire story of a girl’s life” (138). The perspectivist narrative, reconstructed from different points of view, is an attempt to account for the varied views of the historical actors, on the case, and on the slave trade: “No one saw the same girl; she was outfitted in a different guise for each who dared look. She appeared as a tortured virgin, a pregnant woman, a syphilitic tart, and a budding saint” (136). All the protagonists were in different ways “trying to save her life” (137) but all were actually using her as an object: the captain, the surgeon, the abolitionist, and even the historian. The final section represents the girl’s point of view: her refusal to comply was a form of suicide, in order for her soul to fly back to Africa (152). But then again, it

is a fiction, a hypothesis framed for the writer to “feel a small measure of comfort” (153). If “history is how the secular world attends to the dead” (18), historiography may not be enough to negotiate the trauma of the past: the intertwining of varied writing modes in *Lose Your Mother* is an answer of sorts to this realization. Sabine Broeck wrote that the archives of slavery, which may become sanitized by an “objective” treatment, can “regain their ability to haunt contemporary readers only if connected to an ethically self-reflective and deconstructive reassembly of detail” (n.pag.): part of this self-questioning involves the conflation of different narrative genres. According to Michel de Certeau, history and psychoanalysis have two widely different approaches to the past: whereas the former functions in the disjunctive mode, positing the past beside the present, in succession, causality, or correlation, the latter integrates the two time-frames, in the form of imbrication, repetition, or ambiguity (*Histoire et psychanalyse* 87). Narrative fiction, in the form of the traditional historical novel or the postmodern historiographical metafiction, hovers between these poles, at its best being able to probe the motives of a period’s will to history, while giving a hypothetical sense of the ‘felt life’ of the past, and/or its impossibility. The polygraphic structure of *Lose Your Mother*, in its articulation of history, travel narrative, autobiography, and fiction, inverts the famous adage that ‘the personal is political:’ it shows that the scientific discourses of historiography, and their political positioning, also have deeply intimate roots. Psychoanalysis and fiction allow us to deal with collective and individual hauntings that are usually silenced by academic discourse. A complete account of our relation with the past is impossible without a constant shuttling between these different literary modes. It may be in this respect that *Lose Your Mother* comes closest to acknowledging Morrison’s influence, and illustrating how one contemporary historian can come to terms with “writing slavery after *Beloved*.”

### Introduction to the Articles

As intimated by the recurring challenge in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, “Can you read?” (1), the question of writing slavery after *Beloved* is inseparable from that of reading slavery, of making what sense we may of it. The epochal influence of the novel has not only articulated a sort of blueprint for the fictional representation of the lived experience of slavery, textual strategies to be imitated or departed from. It has helped redefine the boundary between the historical and the literary, and therefore allowed to read the slave past in ‘novel’ ways. It has also provided a comparative

landmark for the re-interpretation of previous fictional works about this topic, an exercise practiced by several contributors to this collection.

As Judith Misrahi-Barak writes in her article, “Post-Beloved Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate,” twenty-five years have elapsed since the publication of *Beloved*. In all its complexity, Toni Morrison’s novel forms a peak, she argues, both concluding the previous decades of neo-slave narratives and introducing the following ones. Reviewing the many ways the novel has closed a period and opened a new one can help us gain a new perspective and understand new articulations and developments in slavery literature. The genre of the neo-slave narrative has ceased to be African-American only, Misrahi-Barak maintains, it has become trans-national and global, dialogic, polyphonic and trans-generic. It has also been instrumental in implementing a rapprochement between disciplines whose demarcations used to be watertight.

Toni Morrison has brought her own fictional answer to this question of *Beloved*’s legacy. *A Mercy* (2008) is her first re-reading of the history of slavery since her 1987 masterpiece and, as many hints and echoes dispersed throughout the text indicate, it only takes on its full dimension when correlated with its ‘ancestor.’ On the other hand, it deals with an earlier stage of the evolution of the ‘peculiar institution,’ in an archeology of the birth of the American nation that imaginatively retraces the coalescence of slavery and race—indirectly reminding us that the two could have been dissociated. Both a sequel and a prequel to *Beloved*, *A Mercy* enables us to envision history stereoscopically, thereby opening up a wide array of reading possibilities.

Morrison’s radical philosophical critique is tackled by Samira Spatzek in her “‘Own Yourself, Woman:’ Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Early Modernity, and Property.” On one level, a critique of the duality of property and freedom is set against John Locke’s philosophical thoughts on property. As advanced in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Locke’s conceptualizations of property formed part of modernity’s foundational principles as well as its ellipses. Considering the text proper in terms of its narrative strategies, the question becomes: by which means does one write property or freedom, or frame the self outside the notions of proprietary individualism? One way in which Morrison attempts to deal with this difficulty aesthetically is by constructing the novel as a type of wash drawing that does not offer clear-cut characters but instead creates figures that drift in narrative space. Related to this, Morrison creates a book that is not easily accessible and, most importantly, that does not offer narrative closure.

Stephanie Mueller, in her “The Art of Standing Up to Words—Writing and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” raises the question of the conditions of possibility of resistance against the symbolic violence exercised through language. The novel’s protagonist, an enslaved girl, is tell-

ing her story by carving her words into the walls of her master's house. What begins as a confession grows into an act of resistance against the power of language and against the silence to which slavery condemns its victims. By calling Florens' master Jacob, Morrison also invites an allegorical reading of this act of resistance. In the Bible, the house of Jacob is a synonym for the Israelites, and in the context of American history and culture, God's chosen people is a synonym for America. Bearing in mind both of these levels, one might be led to ponder how *A Mercy* contributes to and makes use of the genre of neo-slave narratives. Florens' quest for identity and agency is conveyed in terms of a quest for a particular kind of literacy, and the voice that Florens gains in the course of this quest is a new voice, one that can change and transform the master's house. Finally, by dealing with the conditions of possibility of resistance, *A Mercy* is also a comment on the role of the author in the public sphere.

Informed in part by Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, Emmanuelle Andrès's close textual analysis, "Reading/Writing 'the most wretched business': Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" stresses the role of the reader in making sense of a problematic language. *Beloved* and *A Mercy* both wrestle with the impossibility of mother love in the context of slavery. The surge of traumatic memory plays and replays the sacrificial event as the text strives to utter the unspeakable. Written twenty-one years after *Beloved*, *A Mercy* once again tries to hear and play the voices of the disremembered and unaccounted for. Whether a mercy or a sacrifice, the founding scene is circled around as the words we hear make us vividly alive to the reality of slavery in which Jacob's utopian farm is still no "sweet home." As mother love and mother tongue cannot be retrieved by the orphan girl, with Florens' voice Morrison invents a language that defies grammar and time sequence while giving license to words and images, thereby freeing language from its codes, as it does in *Beloved*. Florens' incantatory language, like *Beloved*'s, remains unclaimed. It claims itself as she literally inscribes her "letters of talk" on the walls and floor of a room in Jacob's mansion, or in the book we are holding in our hands.

Monica Michlin's "Writing/Reading Slavery as Trauma: Othering, Resistance, and the Haunting Use of Voice in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" insists on the traumatic haunting at the core of the novel. The slave trade is allegorized as a 'pox' upon the initially utopian Vaark farm, a Biblical Fall, an Original Sin. Morrison interweaves forms of 'white slavery' and/or exclusion, but also contrasts them, with the enslavement of Native and Black people. Though in the face of systematic discourses of othering, each oppressed character puts up strategies of resistance, the dialectic of love, loss, and alienation in Florens's story permeates the entire novel. But Florens's voice offers resistance and empowerment as well: the house that Jacob built and that Florens 'haunts' is, in a *mise en abyme* of the house of

fiction reclaimed by Toni Morrison, a black repossession of the house that slavery built.

Treating *Beloved* as an intertextual gravity might well amount to poor methodology, exposing us to retrospective misreadings imbued with a teleological orientation; on the other hand, it may enable us to 'invent' meanings through dialogical comparisons. After all, this is the way the 'wetware' that is our brain functions, sprouting synaptic connections in all directions. A dual study of *Beloved* and one of its 'ancestors,' Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), can help us to better understand the creative environment from which Morrison's novel emerged, as well as define the originality of both works. Maria Varsam's paper, "To Remember or not to Remember: Traumatic Memory and the Legacy of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" explores the generic flexibility of neo-slave narratives, focusing on *Kindred*'s force as a science-fiction inspired "critical dystopia" framing the "concrete dystopia" of the plantation. In an attempt to 'negotiate' with their traumatic past, the female protagonists in both novels must face their memories at the literal level and employ strategies to both overcome and justify the choice of violent action. The ambivalence of this violence provokes a subjective 'split' in their ethical universe which must be resolved if they are to come to terms their past. In the process, traditional borders between 'self'/'other' and 'master'/'slave' are transgressed in order to suggest a new African American female identity and a relational self, which both explain the choice of murder and re-draws the boundaries of moral agency.

Reaching further back in time, Melba J. Boyd's intervention "The Ghost Got It Wrong: Frances E. W. Harper's and Toni Morrison's Representations of Margaret Garner, A Century A/Part" contrasts the treatment of the historical Garner case by Morrison and Harper, whose abolitionist poem "The Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio" was published in 1859. Going against the grain of the generalized praise for *Beloved*'s politics, Boyd poses the ethical question of the treatment of history in fiction, and probes the issue of guilt and haunting. Are magic realist strategies and gothic trappings merely "fantastical escapism"? Do they burden the victims with the blame due to the institution of slavery? The essay acutely delves into the difficulty of balancing history and memory, art and "propaganda," to use W.E.B. DuBois's celebrated phrase (757).<sup>8</sup>

There is a variety of ways in which recent representations of slavery may position themselves in relation to *Beloved*: an 'anxiety of influence' expressed in fidelity or defiance; downright ignorance or indifference, etc. The last three essays illustrate three widely different approaches to this legacy. In "Beyond Magic Realism: the Stuff of Ordinary Lives? Lorene Cary's Rewriting of *Beloved*," Claude Le Fustec examines the 1995 novel *The Price of a Child*, whose very title explicitly echoes Morrison's text.

Cary's work prepares its reader for a fictive response likely to complicate generic issues, especially when considering the surrounding postmodern context. Cary's simple realism then rather comes as a surprise in a novel seemingly dedicated to the systematic inversion of Morrison's strategy, as suggested by its starting point: the heroine's decision to abandon her baby to escape slavery. A close intertextual reading of Cary's and Morrison's texts may pave the way towards an assessment of the effect of Cary's realistic narrative: should her realism be read as a profound narrative act of subversion of what has become the Ur-neo-slave narrative, or does Cary's text evidence what the hunted female characters find out at the end of Morrison's *Paradise*: what it is like to no longer be haunted?

From activist realism to postmodern/baroque/Kitsch hyperbolic pastiche: Stefanie Schäfer in "Plantation Spaces and the Black Body: Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* as Maroon Narrative" reads this film from the epistemological angle of marronage. The film's spatial poetics critique the American symbolic landscapes of the West and the South as well as their cinematic representation. Her analysis examines the depiction of the black body and the blending of Western and Southern spaces in an American master-narrative. In this setup, Tarantino's self-made black cowboy figure is not heroic but remains a cipher in both epistemologies. Django acts as a ghost who haunts the plantation and the frontier in a series of masquerades, thus pointing to the pitfalls of cinema history and national mythmaking.

Finally, Christina Sharpe, in "The Lie at the Center of Everything," examines one of the rare contemporary attempts by white writers to deal with the memory of slavery: Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003). A detailed analysis of the spectacularization of the gaze, along panoptical, voyeuristic lines, in the totalitarian microcosm of the plantation, and of the liminal position of the Mistress, who shares in the master's power but is also its victim, opens up onto the questionable polysemy of the title. By convening both the literary text and promotional media paratext, Sharpe finds that mainstream readers are all too ready to equate the way in which a white woman and her slaves might have all been considered as 'property,' thereby perpetuating a form of blindness and insensitivity to the specific violence against, and suffering of, black people in the United States. The broad generic range of the paper, constantly shifting gears between academic criticism and cultural critique, bespeaks the impossibility to contain these issues within clear-cut disciplinarian categories, driving us once more to an appreciation of Toni Morrison's achievement in her own bids at 'decompartmentalization,' both in fiction and scholarship.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The last chapter of *Beloved* is structured by the ambiguous leitmotiv “This is not a story to pass on” (275), meaning both a story that should not be transmitted and a story too important to ignore.
- <sup>2</sup> A virtual visit is available on the Internet at <http://memorial.nantes.fr/visite-virtuelle/>.
- <sup>3</sup> The addition of this anthropomorphic iconographic element was actually opposed by the designers (Chérel 197–198).
- <sup>4</sup> One may remember that the title of Morrison’s novel is an inscription on a gravestone, making both the cover page and the volume a monument of sorts.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*.
- <sup>6</sup> The reference is to Jonathan Boyarin’s *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (86).
- <sup>7</sup> This somewhat naive argument seems to be contradicted by the ambiguous double ending of the novel, and the almost illegible depiction of the Middle Passage. As Sabine Broeck writes: “the text dares the reader with the ambiguous morality of textually accommodating the devastating loss of human lives by way of *Beloved*’s lapse in, and loss of a novelistic storytelling capacity [...]. In *Beloved*, it is the very void of story which gestures toward an ethically, and linguistically impossible representation” (n.pag.). Both perspectives seem to be interdependent: the ultimate questioning of the possibility to represent the slave past disrupts, yet depends upon, a narrative of individual and collective healing.
- <sup>8</sup> “Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailings of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black people to love and enjoy” (Du Bois 757).

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