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## Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The Story of the Wandering Negro Spirit and Its Four Battling Souls.

*Abdelmajid Ridouane*(\*)

If the Atlantic were to dry up, it would  
reveal a scattered pathway of human  
bones, African bones marking the various  
routes of the Middle Passage.

*John Henrik Clarke.*

In the African-American literary tradition, the return to the past is an all-pervading organic strategy which is endowed with crucial but quite ambivalent meanings. African Americans experienced quite a unique condition that conflated geographical trauma with temporal nostalgia. Within this general framework, I will try to demonstrate how in Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed and Nobel Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987), the multi-faceted strategies deployed to invoke the past occur on two levels: the inner-text's discursive and border-crossing interplay of the past and the present temporal/spatial settings, and the outer-text's ambivalent free-floating interplay of four literary and geographical antecedents.

On the inner-text level, *Beloved's in-medias-res* narrative technique admits to a deep level of restlessness commuting between the painful past and the uncertain present. Toni Morrison takes this condition a step further as the narrative technique (itself a metaphor of the African American trauma) subsets temporal settings in a manner that is neither opaque nor translucent, and the topographical borders neither totally erased nor conspicuously pronounced. *Beloved* intrepidly makes a rip into a borderless past/present binarism to show heart smothering images of psychological pain, family disenfranchisement, social erasure and pseudo-scientific demonization. The second platform from which *Beloved* zooms back to the past occurs on the outer-text level which demonstrates how the narrative's themes and techniques are spelled out from within and against four geographical and literary antecedents: (1) the Western tradition of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Gothic novel, (2) the Black American contemporaneous Slave narrative tradition, (3) the Continental African ancestral oral culture and (4) the more immediate firsthand experienced traumas of the Southern plantations. These four antecedents (the Gothic, the Slave narrative tradition, the African oral culture and the traumas of the Southern plantations) are not distinct units which function separately; there is an interplay amongst them which will be approached on the basis of Morrison's groundbreaking book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the*

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*Literary Imagination* (1993), and the published lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1988).

The Gothic tradition and the Slave narratives manifest an ambivalent interplay as regards the way they scaffold the narrative’s inter-textuality. Though both are signified upon to bring the American Negro’s trauma into focus, they are also powerfully re-questioned. The Slave narrative’s skeptical ability to substantially portray the African Slaves’ plight in the Southern re-memorial sites is now abruptly awakened and ‘unsilenced’. The Gothic images portrayed in *Beloved* are noticeably more disturbing than those the Slave narratives’ authors were allowed to reveal, in large part because the authors of that tradition understandably had to abide by the norms of the white middle class society for or against which they wrote, and also because their self-narratives were largely edited and revised by white abolitionists. Thus, Morrison deploys the Western Gothic techniques, the very tradition that played a seminal role in vilifying Black Americans in Early American Romanticist literature, to uncompromisingly give voice to the faint protest timidly expressed in the African American Slave narratives. More importantly, *Beloved*’s deploying the Gothic tradition’s technique of the “return of the dead” metaphorically articulates the anxiety of the unresolved questions of the past, and tells the story of the parental authority the past has over the present. It also signals that the past is of momentous significance for the characters’ strife to make sense of their present. That being said, the ambivalent interplay of the literary antecedents in question will take on different dimensions as soon as we find out that the return of the suppressed is not exclusively Gothic. Symbolizing the return of the suppressed, *Beloved* the character clearly stretches her origins back to an *African* oral traditional phenomenon called *Abiku-Obanje*<sup>(1)</sup>. That is, the Gothic novel is not the only “vehicle through which the suppressed returns”<sup>(2)</sup>. This is extremely meaningful to the paradigmatic battling ambivalence that governs the interplays under discussion. Having reincarnated *Beloved*, Morrison’s novel, therefore, becomes inter-textually split amongst *Abiku-Obanje* as an “ancestral” African myth, the Gothic as a western literary tradition and the ultimately revised Margaret Garner’s Slave narrative.

This way of approaching *Beloved* largely rests on Morrison’s most known works of criticism, namely *Playing in the Dark*, and, to a considerable extent, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”. Morrison is acutely aware of the Gothic novel’s appurtenance to the hegemonic Master narrative, which bears close Eurocentric kinship to the white written history of slavery which *Beloved* attempts to “unwrite”. Some critics opine that “nothing else but the racial problematic had created the uniqueness in the works referred to as the American Gothic.”<sup>(3)</sup> In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison clarifies how the early American literary production, of which the Gothic romance was the most

(1) *Abiku-Obanje* is a compound word that puts together (*Abiku*) which is a Yoruba term and (*Obanje*) an Igbo term; both terms apply to a spirit in the form of a child who must repeatedly die and be reborn (<http://www.answers.com/topic/abiku>).

(2) Ellen J. Goldner, “Other(ed) Ghosts: Gothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chesnutt, and Morrison,” *MELUS*, Vol.24, Issue: 1 (1999) 59.

celebrated genre, needed the “Africanist” presence as a debased Other in order to project White young American society’s fears on it. Early Americans, who had only recently escaped social injustices and political oppression in the European continent, were experiencing the same insecurity in the unfamiliar New Found Land. The white American literary production, Morrison further argues, projected images of all that is evil, insecurity, and danger on the African subjects and, in counterpart, established itself as freed, enlightened, autonomous and different.<sup>(4)</sup>

Euro-American authors (un)intentionally made use of the Black presence for political, literary and cultural agendas different from the ones underlined in the Slave narratives and abolitionist literature which mainly strove to show the atrocities of the Slavery institution. The erasure of the African subject from the Western Canon is an epistemic violence which Morrison firmly debates in *Playing in the Dark* and “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”. In the latter, she contends that “in 1850 at the height of slavery and burgeoning abolitionism, American writers chose romance.”<sup>(5)</sup> In counterpart, Morrison’s *Beloved* seems to be a rewriting of that same tradition with all its elements ranging from the return of the dead, the sinister geographical settings, terror, fear, improbable plots and unlikely characterization. This technique has been devised in order to re-question, among other things, the alleged invisibility of the “Africanist” presence in that literature, despite its claims to rebel against oppressive institutions (like the ones it fled in Europe).

Morrison’s critical reading of the Gothic as a Master narrative paradigm is not done in a vacuum. Speaking from within the premises of Eurocentrist philosophy that included whites and excluded blacks from the principles of equality and freedom, and therefore rationalizing the Slavery institution, early American writers qualified the African slave both as inarticulate and illiterate; hence his absence, as an active fictional character as well as a reader, is conspicuous from that literature’s center. Morrison observes the white race supremacy myth in the nineteenth century literature and, in a mixture of sarcasm and resentment, remarks that

[i]t could never have occurred to Edgar Allan Poe in 1848 that I, for example, might read “The Gold Bug” and watch his efforts to render my grandfather’s speech to something as close to braying as possible , an effort so intense you can see the perspiration-and the stupidity-when Jupiter says : “I knows” and Mr. Poe spells the verb “nose” (Morrison, “Unspeakable”: 139).

(3) Itoh Shoko, “Poe, Faulkner, and Gothic America.” *The Faulkner Journal of Japan*, Issue N° 3, Sept. 2001, 25 Oct. 2007< <http://www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~thb0559/No3/Itoh.htm>>

(4) Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 38.

(5) Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: The University of Michigan, October 7th 1988) 137.

It is probable that Morrison's return to Poe and the early American romanticists is rooted in the contemporary multi-cultural literary environment which has gradually shown genuine interest in the early racist American literature—an interest underpinned by an acute sensitivity to race matters. Placing the American Gothic within the larger repository of nineteenth century Southern American culture highlights some of this tradition's components which might otherwise be overlooked when it is studied from an exclusively technical or psychological point of view. As a matter of fact, one of the views advanced by the late twenty century multiculturalists is that the Gothic is "a form of cursed tradition of collective American unconsciousness rather than a trend consecutive in literary history or a kind of genre"(Shoko, 4). Though there is not enough space here to discuss Poe, I will briefly turn to him to offer a paradigm of the Gothic genre from within and against which Morrison is writing. Poe, the father of the American Gothic tradition, has been assessed as "a proslavery Southerner and should be reassessed as such in whatever approach we take to his life and writings... [His] proslavery sentiments are fundamental to his literary production" (Rowe, 117).

From a historical point of view, Poe's representation of the Southern Black American has been largely influenced by the Nat Turner rebellion<sup>(6)</sup> which not only coincided with the growth of the whites' supremacy myth, but also fueled their insecurity *vis-à-vis* the Black slave's presence, and therefore portrayed that presence as a dark, threatening and violent Other. His writing was, subsequently, caught in its theoretical contradiction that romanticism is a rebellious impulse against oppressive institutions, while simultaneously being an oppressive by-product of fear of the Other—namely the African Slaves. John C. Rowe argues that

Poe's own repressed fears regarding slave rebellions in the South and the deeper fear that Southern aristocratic life itself might be passing are the psychic contents that provoke the poetic narrative. The defense of the poetic narrative against just these fears is its argument that language, the essence of reason, is the basis of all reality and thus the only proper "property." As the "enlightened ruler" of language, its rational governor, the poet works to re-contain that savagery—the mob, the black, the lunatic—within poetic form.<sup>(7)</sup>

The general atmosphere of insecurity and fear which had been contaminated by the white supremacy myth was, therefore, at the root of the Gothic's covert reconstruction of the Black Slave's image as dark and fearfully mysterious.

(6) The Nat Turner rebellion occurred on August 20th 1831. A slave named Nat Turner was the leader of a slave rebellion that resulted in the deaths of 55 white people, among whom are Turner's master, his wife, and all the members of his family. This rebellion became one of the most famous slave insurrections in U.S. history.

(7) John Carlos Rowe, "Poe, Antebellum Slavery, and Modern Criticism," *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations*, ed. Richard Kopley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992) 117.

Another layer of ambivalence may be located within Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* as it tellingly demonstrates how the Gothic is itself proof enough that the African American presence has genuinely played a seminal role in the construction of a National identity. Morrison argues that "no early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32). "Africanism" Morrison insightfully observes "is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free;... not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny"(53). In her critique of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, she observes that the images of "impenetrable whiteness" occurring in the narrative

appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control; these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing (Morrison,33).

Lindon Barrett explains the passage above as meaning that "meditations or representations of whiteness are conjoined to their antithesis at the very point of their articulation [and that] race insinuates itself into the fabric of the U.S. literary imaginary in the most circumspect of ways."<sup>(8)</sup> Morrison also points out to the inherent contradictions that inform the writings of early American authors and observes that "[this] haunting, a darkness from which [the] early literature seemed unable to extricate itself, suggests the complex and contradictory situation in which American writers found themselves during the formative years of the nation's literature"(33). Among the examples Morrison summons to underline that contradiction is when "[t]he black slave Jupiter is said to whip his master in 'The Gold-Bug'" (58), meaning that in the midst of Poe's racist stereotypical portrayal of Jupiter as inferior, another implicit accompanying portrayal also identifies him as superior to his master.

Morrison's approach to the early American romanticist literature rereads the contradictions inherent in the ways the Black American's (mis)representation as judiciously expressing the early writers' ambivalent explicit feelings of rejection and implicit feelings of recognition. There is a liminal space, on the one hand, between what Toni Morrison considers to be the Gothic's portrayal of Blackness as a threat and Poe as a racist, and, on the other hand, her telling observation of the hidden colossal importance of Blackness in the reconstruction of the American identity. In this liminal space, I assume, Morrison is able to negotiate the African American's belonging to the

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(8) Lindon Barrett, "Presence of Mind Detection and Racialization in 'the Murders in the Rue Morgue' *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. Gerald Kennedy, Liliane Weissberg (Oxford: oxford university press, 2001) 161.

new continent, not the old, in the same fashion the European-American does. "It was this Africanism," writes Morrison, "deployed as rawness and savagery that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" (44).

From this perspective, the Gothic's inability to extricate itself from the Black American's presence inadvertently proves the negro's Americanness more than his Africanness despite the fact that, at the Romanticist era, slaves still kept fresh memories and strong longing for the African continent. The African slave's ambivalent state is as old as his existence on the American continent. Despite his past, it is his future that he has to struggle for, and to struggle for that future, he cannot do without his past. Morrison's return to the Gothic in *Beloved* is, therefore, not only a deployment of its techniques but also a deconstruction of its underground racist implications; it is a revisionist rereading of that tradition and a redressing of its contradictions. It is also a powerful critique of the Gothic's hidden capacity to be a vehicle which widely circulated images of the American slave as the savage feared Other and his blackness as a paradigm of threat, the unknown and the mysterious. Morrison, therefore, qualifies the Gothic as a form of literary propaganda which simultaneously discarded the atrocious effects of slavery on both white and black American people.

Despite the significance of the Slave narrative as a genre which recorded some of the most meaningful stages of the African American's struggle for emancipation and equality, the Gothic tradition which "ostensibly" played a role in the Master narrative's cover up for the Slavery institution could equally be deployed as a pro-Africanist genre. At this particular point and in connection with the ambivalent interplays that I am trying to discuss in this paper, some important questions could be asked: why were the Slave narratives not as informed by the same Gothic images that plagued the Western Gothic despite their extremely relevant subject matter and contemporaneity to the Gothic romance? Could the Slave narratives not aptly explore the elements of slaves' lives which did encompass a great deal of horrendous images and horrific experiences? Asked otherwise, what could the Slave narratives have told us if they had not been so heavily edited by white abolitionists?

In a remarkably interesting book review<sup>(9)</sup>, Elizabeth Young argues that two narratives that open up new uncovered zones of the literal horrors of slavery have recently been discovered. One of these narratives, significantly edited by Henry Louis Gates, is Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1855). Young observes that "*The Bondwoman's Narrative*" is a remarkable work that shows the deep connections between race and Gothic horror in American culture" and underlines "the strengths of the Gothic as a literary form of resistance for those whose literal worlds already constitute a night of the living dead". The plot of this exceptionally significant and unique Slave narrative, as Young summarizes it,

(9) Elizabeth Young, rev. of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts. The Chicago Tribune Aug. 11, 2002. 20 Oct. 2007 <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/oped/slavery.shtml>.

traces the tragic story of a slave named Rose and her beloved dog, the favorite of a daughter who has been sold into slavery in Alabama. When her cruel master orders her to kill the dog, Rose refuses, and as punishment woman and dog are suspended horrifically from a linden tree. Rose remains committed to the dog—and the daughter it symbolizes—to the last. The dog dies, as does Rose, but she also gets a form of revenge against the master by haunting the tree after her death. Her silenced tongue is restored, Philomela-like, in the sounds made by the tree, and for Crafts and the other slaves who hear this story, “the creaking of its branches filled [their] bosoms with supernatural dread” (Young, 5).

There is a striking similarity between Craft's novel and Morrison's *Beloved*, in that the original source of horror is the white man, but the principal tool used to resist it is the Gothic language and representation. That is, in *Beloved*, as in *The Bondswoman*, we encounter horror as man-made not as imagined. The historical and real slavery horrors deconstruct the contemporaneous Western Gothic imaginary horrors. As Craft meaningfully states, “I seldom gave way to imaginary terror. I found enough in the stern realities of life to disquiet and perplex” (Young, 7). The relation of Morrison's novel to the Gothic as a literary antecedent is quite ambivalent. It speaks about horror as a Gothic technique and the horror which slavery used to signify. As Brown remarks, “horror serves not only as a surprisingly realistic medium through which to represent slavery, but also as a powerful means of resistance to it” (Young, 7).

Morrison, therefore, deploys the Gothic in *Beloved* for several reasons. First, to re-question it and to subtly condemn it as a ‘schoolteacher’s’ strategy devised to misrepresent the Black Americans during the Romantic era; second, to exhume its inherent contradictions born out of its attempt to freeze the crucial importance of the Black American to the construction of the American national identity; third to show its inability to hide its implicit recognition of the Black American's presence. Most importantly, the Gothic is used to incarnate the suppressed (symbolically, the unresolved past of the Black race and the unspoken traumas of slavery). The Gothic aspect of the Slave narrative is muted; the Slave narrative has been coerced into compromising the irreversible truth that none but those narratives written by Blacks who experienced the horrors of slavery could genuinely portray the Slaves' horrific experiences. The awakening of the dormant terror in the Slave narrative can unravel what Gilroy calls “the deep sense of complicity of racial terror with reason,”<sup>(10)</sup> clearly represented by Schoolteacher and his sons. Morrison has extraordinarily achieved this objective through devising Gothic techniques in *Beloved* “which work to invert racist images of the colonized or enslaved by (re)locating evil in the rational order of slavery... [It]revises Gothic otherness into a device for exposing the intersections between slavery

(10) Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993) 73.



and science, and for delegitimizing Western rationality as it presides over slavery” (Goldner, 59). Among the techniques of the Gothic which Goldner observes are the haunting and the “return of the suppressed” which “preserve the dead amid the living and the past amid the present, [and] defy the concept of linear time ... [and] thus defy the Western dream of control” (Goldner, 59).

The return of the suppressed could, therefore, be a symbolic return of (and to) the suppressed African roots. Beloved’s relationship to the African past is powerfully reinvigorated by its use of the quite significant Igbo *Abiku Obunje* oral tradition which Sethe’s relationship to Beloved has signified upon. In fact, *the Abiku-Obunje* is a wanderer who migrates between the past and the present. This movement gives it ampler significance within this study of migratory African American literary tropes that it can possibly be given in the Western Gothic tradition. One of the ways Morrison revises the Gothic is that unlike Western discourse, which conceives of the “return” as unreal, Morrison unequivocally portrays Beloved’s return as physically real. Beloved, who is literally found on Sethe’s doorstep as a beautiful young woman in her early twenties, will actually act as all the characters do in the novel. Goldner argues that “Morrison’s novel offers many African American characters who, together, acknowledge the haunting of Sethe’s house as the central “fact” of the former slave’s life. Until its final pages, every African American character accepts the haunt as true” (Goldner 59). Similar to their African ancestors’ unquestionable belief in the return of *Abiku Ogbanje*, the characters in the novel do not seem, as Goldner argues, to question Beloved’s ability to return. In fact, like their African ancestors, their “battle against the offending Beloved is a collaborative exorcism effected through singing, chanting, praying, dancing, and food offering—rituals that appear African. The exorcism restores Sethe’s mental health, and she becomes reintegrated within the society.”<sup>(11)</sup>

It should be underlined that even today “the notion of *Abiku Ogbanje* is a common phenomenon in West African countries”<sup>(12)</sup>. In his enlightening article, Ogunjuyigbe states that “Abikus are described as spirit children whose mercurial treatment, even rejection, of their parents (mothers especially) leave the mothers in most pitiable state (Soyinka, 1981; Okri, 1995 and Ogunyemi, 1996).” (Ogunyemi 5). He also meaningfully remarks that “*Abiku* children inflict a lot of pain and agony on their mothers...The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria call the living icon ‘*Ogbanje*’ (Achebe, 1958 and Achebe, 1986). Finally, and most importantly “the *ogbanje* child also emerges as a frequent traveler between the world of the living and the place of the friendly dead (Achebe, 1958, Quayson, 1997)” (Ogunyemi 5).

(11) “An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka’s *Ake* and Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *African American Review*. Vol. 36, Issue: 4. 2002. 663+.

(12) Peter O. Ogunjuyigbe, “Under-Five Mortality in Nigeria: Perception and Attitudes of the Yorubas Towards the Existence of ‘Abiku’ “ *Demographic Research*. Volume 11, Aug. 13 2000 443-56 Sep.11 2007  
<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol11/2/11-2.pdf>

*Abiku-Ogbanje* is present in *Beloved* as a wandering restless spirit who transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, as a returned child who torments her mother, and as memory which keeps coming back. It is

constantly on the move, and [its] presence highlights the insecurities of an exiled/nomadic status... [its] perennial search for another place for security is the destiny of ogbanje, as it is of black peoples ... The global implications date back to slavery and colonialism with their increase of forced, migratory patterns. (An Abiku Ogbanje Atlas 12).

This sense of unease and restlessness which contaminated the Slaves' lives ever since they forcefully landed on a foreign land still persists. On the one hand, it echoes Abiku's inland diaspora and its search for a home to rest; on the other hand, it resonates with the original Diaspora and the reestablishment of the ties between desired/rejected mother Africa and the lost children who keep the memory, keep coming back, as they keep looking for a place to rest. The departure from Africa, the "African American longing (and hate) for this other place, the consequent, disruptive parent-child relationship with Africa are traits that identify diasporans as embroiled in the abiku-ogbanje predicament" (An Abiku Ogbanje Atlas 15). Reminiscent of Paul Gilroy's capturing the Africans' diasporic dilemma/ambivalence in his *Black Atlantic*, Abiku's movement between the past and the present and mobilization to and from geographical locations draws on the following:

a triangulation involving Africa, the Americas, and Europe, [which] has the hallmarks of uneasy parent-child relationships. Imperial Europe considers Africa as the child; Africa regards Europe as the child whose infantile desire imposes its way on others; African America claims/rejects Africa as mother. The endless quarrel is a protracted inconvenience, with each side unable to move forward without reference to the other. (An Abiku Ogbanje Atlas 21).

*Beloved's* irresistible move to the past strongly reverberates with *Abiku's* state of being split between more than one geographical location. The characters seem to be "bogged down by memory," as they, like *Abiku*, "find it difficult to let go the pleasures of a past existence" (An Abiku Ogbanje Atlas 18), and they almost perfectly confirm Denver's wondering: "how come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (Morrison 16).

The dramatic effects of restlessness which are evidently part of *Beloved* and her mother's traumatic experiences may be sensed in the fact that both women had to depart from their uncomfortable immediate temporal settings to the other side of those settings. *Beloved* and her mother metaphorically crisscrossed as the former took a trip to the past, the latter to the present; this, in a sense, makes both women Abikus, as Sethe's rememory may be perceived as a return to haunt Sweet Home, the same way the murdered slave haunted the tree in the *Bondswoman Narrative*, discussed previously. This crisscrossing affects the narrative technique; it disturbs the act of narration,

decentralizing the plot; as the *Abiku* reverses the flashback patterns, Sethe is sucked into her painful past. That the two women should depart from one setting to the other inseminates their movements with the condition of continuous movement and migration. Sethe's rememory and Beloved's invasion of the present -as we shall see shortly- powerfully annihilate the classical distinction between the past and the present. Sethe and Beloved meet in a different dimension, one that is liminal, while reproducing the same physical and psychological traumas that the former slaves experienced on the geographical level, immediately after their painful deportation from the African continent to a completely and unfamiliar hostile environment.

Beloved — the living memory from the past-is remarkably endowed with a functional ambivalent profile. Besides her *Abiku-Obanje* evident attributes, Beloved's description of the place where she comes from as being dark and herself being "small in that place" hints to the foetal phase in her mother's womb. She further describes that place as "hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in" (Morrison 88). Whatever the implications of her description, Africa does not seem to fit into Beloved's description of her origins. The description, like the flashbacks, goes as far back as the Middle Passage. This description of someone ready to come out to life may as well apply to the deported slaves on their way to oblivion and death when they were herded in ships for months across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. Beloved has, therefore, come from a place which is, like her present status, one of both life and death, of presence and absence. It is interesting that on many occasions, Beloved has underscored the image of the bridge: somewhere between two river banks, two continents, a passage, a no man's land, somewhere between the past and the future, a transition and a sense of no belonging: "the clearest memory she had, the one she repeated, was the bridge-standing on the bridge looking down" (Morrison 142).

The symbol of the bridge dovetails with the two-way movement of past and present. Like Sethe and her daughter's crisscrossing, the bridge as a passageway ushers the horrific past into the present, and simultaneously let fly the shattered pieces of a decomposing present into the past. Beloved's ambivalent identity (as memory/spirit and body, innocence and threat, infant and woman, absence and presence or death and reincarnation) allows her to move across and between several platforms of the narrative, be they character relationships, narrative technique, or symbolism; the wide variety of symbols that her undecided profile incarnates also allows her to move between the inner and the outer realms of the narrative to broadly represent the whole of the African American past and present condition. She embodies the African American history and "symbolizes not only Sethe's and her own tragic past, but the collective horror of slavery as well. She is both the enslaved African American and the African enchained on the slave ship in the Middle Passage."<sup>(13)</sup>

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(13) Anissa J. Wardi, "Inscriptions in the Dust: A Gathering of Old Men and Beloved as Ancestral Requiems", *African American Review*, Vol. 36, 2002, 80.

If the Gothic injects the narrative with a feeling of mystery and unease, the Abiku contributes the same effect but it also affixes the additional crucial component of restlessness and liminality. Consequently, though *Beloved's* uncomfortable narrative technique emanates from both, its engagement in a frenetic ambivalent narrative structure which erases temporal borders and re-draws them in separated, ostensibly unrelated, pieces of narrative puzzles clearly draws its significance from the Abiku-Obanje phenomenon. However, it should be understood that this clear reference to the African heritage is not a metaphor of romanticizing Africa, because, as I have just argued, the return to the past goes only as far back as the Middle Passage. Simultaneously, this writing/reading process is exhaled from the depths of the brain and heart clutching plight that the brutalized Africans experienced when they were violently snapped from their African homes and thrust into slavery in the American South. The memory of that trauma would not die and be buried, but shall keep coming back. The reader is not only made to watch the events in the novel unfold; he himself becomes active and suffers as he, like a participant in an African ritual, almost takes part in the action as it happens; Morrison explains that "[t]he reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign...Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense (Morrison 161)".

As a result, the chronological order of events usually patterning the Slave narrative genre is irrecoverable. The Abiku/*Beloved's* return injects the narrative with a sense of the Gothic, but leaps beyond its "rationality and "orderly narrative" through a "frenzied" narrative into which many elements of the American Negroes' conditions congregate: the Black people's traumatic crossing, uncertain present, split geographical locations, longing, lack of belonging, hijacked identity, unsatisfactory present, unknown hostile environment and obscure future. What the African Americans had to go through was psychologically so devastating that the mothers' and their children's lynched souls were literally catapulted from one space to another. The narrative metaphorically reacts to that traumatic experience: time and space cannot keep their own orderly, well-determined and easily distinguished duality. The reader is not safe from the repercussions of what the agonizing characters go through. His reading, like a "process of reconstructing the fragmented story, parallels Sethe's psychological recovery."<sup>(14)</sup> He redas along as "repressed fragments of the (fictionalized) personal and historical past are retrieved and reconstructed."<sup>(15)</sup>

One of *Beloved's* most engaging narrative aspects is, as mentioned above, *Abiku's* ability to reverse the flashback narrative effect, the powerful eruptions of the past and the difficulty to peel that past off from the present or the present from the past. Sethe's struggle to keep the repetitive Abiku-like rememory away is not only proof that the past

(14) Linda Krumholz, "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 109

(15) Idem.

has quite a dreadful authority to keep coming back, and therefore needs “struggle” to keep it “at bay”, but the very act of struggling against it gives it flesh and more presence. In other words, the past, like *Beloved*, becomes both a haunting and a palpable presence. The past is not easy to slice off of the present; it is an integral part of it.

The act of reading proves painful. The unavoidable act of remembering makes the present a platform that witnesses the narration’s repetitive returns back to the past. Sethe’s outspoken intention to forget but also refresh her past renders the roughly static present a faint backdrop to the bold and focused vivid memories of that past. Moreover, the present seems to manifest the same fragility Sethe suffers in *Beloved*/Abiku’s bold presence. Sethe, who struggles to forget, is also fully aware that the past still exists. It is there. It never dies:

Sethe: It’s so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory . . . But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place-the picture of it- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world (Morrison, 43).

The unexpected news about the characters’ past in the present time of the narrative further problematizes the nature of the movement between the past and the present as well as the nature of Sethe’s returns to the past. The present becomes the space that witnesses the narration’s subtle unveiling that the past haunts the present more than the characters have come to believe. The past signified upon by *Beloved*’s reincarnation has threatening authority over Sethe. Even if she conducts the majority of the flashback trips, she is clearly bewildered when Paul D, for instance, informs her of Halle’s presence at the rape scene. Sethe can neither stop the flux of her rememory nor shelter from other catapulted devastating untold stories from that past.

The present suddenly combines “new pictures and old memories that broke her heart” (Morrison 112). The space is now filled with once-dormant sorrow, which suddenly wakes up in the present, colonizes it, and gives itself life, voice and authority so much so that it eclipses any focus on the characters’ present. In one bewildered gasp, Sethe reminds us that that past is spitefully haunting and unrestrainedly ambulant-the characters think that they go back to it, while in fact that past also comes forth to them. It is consequently hard to decide who exercises more authority over the other, Sethe or her past.

Sethe does not only go back to her past; her past too comes forward to find her. It puts in peril all the healing powers of her “rememory” and injects the “helpless” present with fresh threatening sorrows. The breaking news from Sethe’s “undead” past confirms her conviction that “nothing ever [dies]” (Morrison 43). Morrison seems to signal that the memory of slavery is still alive and vivid in the Black people’s consciousness, and, consequently, the *Abiku* may be back, any time, again. More importantly, it confirms the historical present’s unquestionable vulnerability to that past. Sethe’s ambivalent profile is, therefore, of a seemingly safe storyteller, who thinks she chooses to embark on a

“rememory” trip towards “places [which] are still there”. It turns out that Sethe is a vulnerable “explorer” who suddenly discovers that the past she thinks is “there” is in reality an Abiku which is here breathing, lurking among the shuttered pieces of her present life. When we read Sethe’s argument that “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay”, we, therefore, sense how ironical that statement is. Sethe is in fact under the gaze and at the mercy of the past she ironically tries to keep at bay.

As an ambulant *Abiku* and a haunting figure erasing the distinction between past and present, *Beloved* is intermingled with the Western Gothic narrative technique, but remains a self-imposing crucial mythical symbol that connects Black Americans to their origins—an act which revives an abhorrent past and demands explanations. Unlike Gothic fictional characters devised to enchant readers, *Beloved* has roots in the historical past; it is the symbol of an innocence lynched by the Western pseudoscientific rationality, and is “memory made flesh..., as *Ogbanje*, [she] will never totally fade away. She is the past that haunts and demands acknowledgment; she is the mistreated child that desires love; she is the history that insists on truthful disclosure; she is slavery incarnate.” (Abiku Obanje Atlas 9).

*Beloved* is laudable because, among several other reasons, the “writerly” wounds that the narrative technique inflicts upon the reader are kept fresh by the horror of what is narrated. Morrison achieves this through the profound and far-reaching reconstruction of the true story of Margaret Garner, who in order to spare her daughter the horrors of what she had suffered, slit her throat. The representation of what a slave woman went through emanates, as Morrison explains, from the responsibility she undertakes “to rip the veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate” in order “to yield up a kind of a truth.”<sup>(16)</sup> While rewriting Margaret Garner’s story, Morrison revisits the past in order to “find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it” (*Site of Memory*, 109). Also, as she dedicates her works “to the sixty millions and more,” Morrison clearly designates her destination—the millions of Africans and American slaves who did not have a voice, and who did not survive to tell their stories, or who did, but left no written records (*Site Of Memory*: 110). Morrison, therefore, transfers us again to the silence imposed by the Romanticist literary protectorate, so to speak. She redefines the Slave narrative as the paradigm of silence that needs to be revisited and re-questioned. Morrison dives into these depths with the company of larger-than-life women: Margaret Garner, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver and *Beloved*, and larger-than-history men such as Paul D, Stamp Paid and Sixo, to whom voice is restored. The power of *Beloved* is manifest in its profound infiltration into these characters’ brutalized and shattered inner lives. It endows them, in what is an equally brutal narrative technique, with meaning that binds the ancestors’ despair with the grandchildren’s hopes.

(16) Toni Morrison, “Site of Memory,” *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 109-110.

But the grandchildren's hopes still strive to come true. Having been disillusioned in the North, the offspring of the African American freed slaves provoke quite a complex new paradigm of ambivalence that characterizes their relationship to the South as a place of pain and suffering which they sought to flee, but which becomes a home that stirs feelings of nostalgia rather than dread and a desire to forget. Fleeing the atrocities of the South and longing for it while in the North, therefore, refreshes the theme of the Black American's ambivalent condition and re-transfers us to the significant issue of restlessness and the Black community's imperative to be on the move between geographical, literary, cultural, or psychological doubles. The South shall, nonetheless, remain not only a powerful representative of the African American ancestral past, but also an extended metaphor of the ubiquitous ambivalence that governs every aspect of the Black American condition. The South is a site of dualities, and sometimes of contradictions which we can clearly see when we juxtapose the longing and nostalgia with trauma and shame as we experience them in *Beloved*.

To summarize the many realizations that the South has on African American literature, Anissa Wardi observes that

numerous critics have articulated the South as a complex geography of home and exile: Baraka labels the "Black-South" a "homeland" and "the scene of the crime"; Atkinson and Page remark on the "joy and shame" of the South; Yaeger considers the Southland "as ancestral torture chamber and as ancestral home"; Fultz argues that, "for many African Americans, the South remains a place of comfort and contradiction-a place to turn toward and a place to turn from"; and Beavers contends that for the men in Toni Morrison's fiction, the South is a "place of origin and curse". (Anissa Wardi, 3)

Like the *Abiku-Ogbanje*, the ambivalent realizations of the Southern plantations shall haunt the black American consciousness. *Beloved* was written to signify that haunting state and to hint to the fact that, like *Beloved*, the African oral culture, and the means and forms of cultural expression which were dismissed as heathen and primitive also underwent the same repressive policy by the Western hegemonic system of thought in the American South. *Abiku Obunje* may be a celebration of that past that should also be revisited and bridged to the second ancestral home of the enslaved Africans and their children. Unsurprisingly, this other front of the war which the African slave had to fight is the backside facet of his absence from the contemporaneous Romantic literature. That is, the African slave was not only denied the American identity; he was also denied the Africanness he wanted to express. *Beloved*'s simultaneous deployment of the *Abiku* and the Gothic therefore tears through the Western hegemony to reach the African dismissed oral tradition in a historical time in which African American forms of expression are not confined within the slave community in the American South, but are themselves an integral part of the American literature.

To sum up, Morrison's novel invents a new multi-layered approach to the past. It gives the latter authority and power; it also makes use of it and re-questions it. It isolates it in flashbacks, but also allows it to erupt and destabilize the present. Through the painful relationship of *Beloved* and her mother, the reader is introduced to the atrocious experiences that African slaves suffered through the painful relationship of *Beloved* and her mother. The past inundates the present, the narratological painful construction of scraps, unfinished events and deferred accounts. The reader also shares these experiences with African slaves through flashbacks that crisscross with an ambulant past which is explored and has an authority of its own. The return to the past in Morrison's narrative is also a literary, historical, cultural and political statement which negotiates African Americanness on liminal spaces which bring many traditions as well as many geographical locations together. The Slave narrative tradition, the Gothic, the African oral tradition and the memories of the Southern plantations are the four souls of *Beloved*. *Beloved* the character is the Negro spirit, or the spirit of Negroes that returned from the past to haunt our reading of the novel's largely successful mission to unveil the horror, and to unsilence the unspeakable.



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