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LESLIE BOW *and* RUSS CASTRONOVO

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CHAPTER 20

CULTURAL MEMORY STUDIES AND THE *BELOVED* PARADIGM

From Rememory to Abolition in the Afterlives of Slavery

MICHAEL ROTHBERG

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* is one of the most quickly and definitively canonized literary works of the twentieth century. A winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, *Beloved* was also one of the novels mentioned by the Nobel Prize committee when Morrison won that award in 1993. Yet even those distinguished prizes do not quite capture *Beloved*'s extensive influence. We can get a more complete sense of the novel's impact by considering its importance for scholars and teachers as well as its place in library collections. Google Scholar lists 19,200 entries that refer to Morrison's 1987 novel in the thirty-three years since its publication. While absolute numbers cannot speak for themselves, a comparative search confirms *Beloved*'s status as *the* canonical work of recent times. *Beloved* far outpaces Morrison's other work: a search for the 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, for instance, returns 7,430 entries and novels such as *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* receive somewhat fewer. Even more tellingly, other prominent novels of the period also fall far behind *Beloved*. Margaret Atwood's influential *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) receives 7,020. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), a signature text of the "postmodern" 1980s, receives 5,320 citations; his *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), and *Underworld* (1997) have received far fewer. The surprisingly incomplete Modern Language Association International Bibliography lists only 418 entries for *Beloved* but that is still far more than those for the other texts mentioned here. Combining data from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and leading American literature journals, the website *Metacanon* ranks *Beloved* as the most canonical work of twentieth-century American literature. The novel also occupies a prominent place in the classroom: Open Syllabus Explorer has recorded 2,743 appearances of *Beloved* on

English literature syllabi. That makes *Beloved* the twenty-eighth most frequently taught work in English-language literature courses across periods, but that list also includes numerous writing and style handbooks along with works of poetry and drama. Although it falls beyond the purview of this chapter, *Beloved*'s prominent status is without doubt global: WorldCat's Identities feature lists over 500 editions of the novel in 24 languages, which are held by over 13,000 libraries.[1]

Crowned by prizes, cited by legions of critics, and taught in thousands of high-school and college classrooms, *Beloved* is also much more than a novel. Indeed, as Stephen Best argues in an influential article, *Beloved* became a "paradigm" that "shape[d] the way a generation of scholars conceived of its ethical relationship to the past" (2012: 461, 459). In so doing, the novel extended the reach of literary influence far beyond the usual limits: "For a distinctive if not singular moment in the history of the interpretive disciplines, a novel set the terms of the political and historiographical agenda" (459). Those terms, which Best glosses in a skeptical vein, involve a "melancholic historicism" that collapses past and present and an "unassailable" assertion that "the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present" (460, 453). In order to illustrate this melancholic paradigm, Best quotes an interview in which Morrison describes her goal in the novel as an attempt to make readers "yearn for [the] company" of the devastated families she depicts in order that they may "know what slavery did." For Best, this affective component of Morrison's novel turns her melancholic historicism into a vector for the production of collective memory: "'To know what slavery did,' to make it not simply an object of experience or epistemology but the grounds of memory, Morrison resists a view of loss as the property of an immediate circle of kin and encourages us to claim that loss for ourselves" (460). Through this transformation of history into collective memory or what Morrison calls "rememory," "the traumatic events of slavery and the middle passage ... suffuse the vastness of the Atlantic itself as a general historical framework and condition" (458).

Best's diagnosis of *Beloved*'s oceanic influence was meant critically. Against what he characterizes as the straitjacket of slavery's hauntings, he calls for a shift in the conversation about race and African American culture toward "a more baffled, cut-off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past" (472)—a position he finds in Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*. Yet, despite Best's attempt to wrest a different, less determinate relation between race and slavery from Morrison's late work, the *Beloved* paradigm has, if anything, intensified in the years since his essay appeared. In particular, the increased visibility of white supremacy, police violence against African Americans and other people of color, and the carceral state has brought with it a more widespread sense that present-day concerns grow out of unresolved injustices dating back to the nation's foundational

[1] On Google Scholar, I used the suggested search phrase "Author Title 'Criticism'": see also https://metacanon.org (accessed February 21, 2022) and https://opensyllabus.org/result/title?id=7516192773636 (accessed March 2, 2022). Taken individually, all of these pieces of evidence are flawed. Taken together, they confirm what many of us already believe is *Beloved*'s unusual status among twentieth-century American novels.

system of slavery. The #Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in 2013 (the year after Best's essay appeared), the increasingly prominent calls for reparations, and the rise of Afropessimist thought in and beyond the academy illustrate how those foundational injustices continue to shape (without fully determining) prominent conceptualizations of the Black political present.

For the purposes of this chapter, the point is not to adjudicate the question of slavery's relation to the present but to recognize and attempt to understand the work of memory performed by Morrison's novel. Against the backdrop of *Beloved*'s outsized influence, I propose to read the novel as a lens through which to reflect on the relationship of literature to cultural memory studies.[2] The emergent interdisciplinary field of cultural memory studies offers a conceptual framework that helps explain the cultural work Morrison's novel does as well as the reasons it has resonated so powerfully across the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Memory studies as it is currently configured emerges primarily out of European thought and remains at its most robust in European academic networks and civil society organizations engaged with the memory of the Second World War and the Soviet bloc. Yet, increased attention in the United States to the memory of slavery and the Civil War as well as the relation of that memory to ongoing structures of white supremacy has brought questions of cultural memory to the fore in the public sphere in recent years. American literary and cultural studies thus have much to gain from engagement with the conceptual toolbox of memory studies. At the same time, the example of *Beloved* has much to contribute to the development of memory studies, which as a field has until recently neither sufficiently engaged questions of race nor adequately interrogated its European origins. Reading *Beloved* through memory studies and memory studies through *Beloved* may help open up what I have called a "multidirectional" vision for American literary studies.

The emergence of memory as a matter of both scholarly and public concern corresponds to an important shift in the status of history over recent decades. As literary critic and memory scholar Ann Rigney argues, the growing prominence of memory-based approaches in the humanities since the 1980s has accompanied the historical discipline's loss of a monopoly on interpretive authority about the past: films, works of literature, popular television documentaries, museums, memorials, and other cultural productions now compete with disciplinary history over the image of the past. In Rigney's words, "a society's dealings with the past can no longer be happily divided into 'history proper,' identified with the work of professional historians, and 'nonhistory' or 'improper history,' identified with all the rest" (2004: 364). Rigney's description of this transformation in historical culture helps contextualize Best's description of the *Beloved* paradigm as a moment in which a novel began to set the agenda for grappling with the past. If Morrison's 1987 novel—and its central category of "rememory"—resonates

[2] I provide a brief genealogy of cultural memory studies below. Cognitive, psychological, and neuroscientific approaches to memory also abound, but my focus remains limited to approaches found in the humanities and interpretive social sciences that have the greatest purchase among literary scholars of memory.

most powerfully as an evocation of what Saidiya Hartman and others have called the "afterlives of slavery," an approach grounded in memory studies can help connect the specificity of *Beloved*'s intervention with broader cultural currents inside and outside the academy. A memory studies approach helps us understand Morrison's novel as a *noeud de mémoire*, a knot of memory that serves as both outcome and conduit for multiple historical narratives (see Rothberg et al. 2010). Exploring *Beloved*'s canonicity as a problem of cultural memory also provides a new angle on twentieth-century US literary history: it allows us to situate that history within a more encompassing framework in which literary texts both "remember" the haunting past and subsequently become objects of remembrance in the unfinished struggles of the present.

Cultural Memory Studies: A Very Short Introduction

As a topic of reflection, memory is both ancient and new. Exploration of the individual human capacity to recall the past extends back to Plato and Aristotle and accompanies the history of European philosophy (see Ricoeur 2004). For our purposes, however, a key turning point occurs in the early twentieth century. Not only was this a moment when individual memory was again at the forefront of investigation in thought and culture through the writings of Freud, Bergson, Proust, and others. It was also the moment when the insight emerged that memory is not simply a cornerstone of individual identity but also a building block of collectives—and, indeed, that individual memory is itself beholden to collectives. In a book published in 1925, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs coined the term "collective memory" [*la mémoire collective*] to describe the binding force of remembrance in the context of groups of all sizes—from the family to the nation to the great religious traditions—but his focus was especially on small-scale assemblages. For Halbwachs, a student of Emile Durkheim, individuals only remember because they possess "social frameworks" [*les cadres sociaux*] that allow them to retain and make sense of experiences. If the individual remains the carrier of memory, that memory only emerges in determining social contexts that provide the "language" or schemata for articulating the past in the present. According to Halbwachs, we possess multiple memories because we belong to multiple groups at a variety of scales; yet, each group remains relatively homogenous in his account.

Halbwachs's work—now considered the "first stage" of modern memory studies—became influential when it was picked up and developed starting in the 1980s.[3] Memory studies as a contemporary intellectual formation dates to this "second stage," not least to

[3] For an account of the three stages of modern memory studies, see Erll's influential "Traveling Memory" (2011a). For a complete survey of the field, including a chapter on "Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory," see Erll's *Memory in Culture* (2011b).

the agenda-setting work of the French historian Pierre Nora on what he calls "les lieux de mémoire" (sites of memory). Published in three enormous collective volumes between 1984 and 1992, Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire* surveys various "sites"—material and symbolic—in which cornerstones of French identity coalesce. Ironically, Nora's project, which stimulated the contemporary efflorescence of memory studies, is premised on the notion that "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (1989: 7); that is, for Nora, "true" memory only takes place in the small-scale groups that were the primary focus of Halbwachs's approach to collective memory and that Nora calls "*milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (7). Sites of memory, in contrast, are compromise formations that simulate memory at the national scale and at the moment when modernization is destroying the foundations of communal "milieus" of remembrance. Despite the critical perspective on contemporary formations of memory Nora set out to offer, he came to realize that his work actually fueled an expansion of the mnemonic imperative. For the US context, it was indeed the 1989 translation of Nora's introduction to the volume, "Between Memory and History"—two years after the appearance of *Beloved*—that catalyzed academic interest in cultural memory. Nora's work also found fertile ground in a post-Vietnam America that was grappling with questions of trauma and in which remembrance of the Holocaust was becoming a significant feature of public culture. Indeed, the field of memory studies in the United States would evolve in close connection to the early 1990s efflorescence of both trauma theory and Holocaust studies (a point to which I will return).

Particularly relevant for a consideration of the relation of literary studies to memory studies—and to the particular case of *Beloved*—are the subsequent interventions of two German scholars: Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, an Egyptologist and a literary scholar, respectively. In work that began in the 1980s and continues until today, the Assmanns explicitly take up Halbwachs's notion of "collective memory," but they argue that there are two fundamentally different forms of collective memory: "communicative memory" and "cultural memory" (J. Assmann 2008). For the Assmanns, communicative memory names the small group remembrance at the center of Halbwachs's thought, which was also described by Nora as originating in "milieux de mémoire." Communicative memories are transmitted primarily in face-to-face contexts, such as families, and have a lifespan of approximately three generations or 80–100 years. The Assmanns' notion of cultural memory [*das kulturelle Gedächtnis*] describes the institutionalization of remembrance, its ritualization, materialization, and textualization, which clearly echoes Nora's concept of sites of memory. Once given material form and consecrated as cultural memory, figures of memory can span hundreds, even thousands of years, as illustrated by religious symbols such as the Christian cross recalling the crucifixion or rituals such as the Passover Seder recalling the ancient Israelites' delivery from bondage. Communicative and cultural memory do not succeed each other historically as forms—as in Nora's linear schema of milieus giving way to sites of memory—but rather coexist and even feed into each other. The Assmanns' distinction thus avoids the teleological, pessimistic narrative of modernity embedded in Nora's project and permits a more dynamic account of the relations between different modes of remembrance. Yet,

embodied, communicative memory *of particular events* must eventually pass into an institutionalized form of cultural memory or it will recede into oblivion. It is precisely this transition from communicative to cultural memory that motivates many of the contemporary discussions of Holocaust remembrance and that also has relevance for the memories of slavery that haunt contemporary Black life, as I will demonstrate.

An influential essay by Aleida Assmann offers a further distinction within cultural memory between the archive and the canon that likewise has implications for the remembrance of slavery offered by *Beloved*. The archive, a repository of potential cultural memory, gathers together the traces of cultures and civilizations but does not circulate them. It represents a "passive" form of cultural memory. The canon, in contrast, results from a process of selection that activates and circulates such material traces and establishes them as privileged reference points for cultures, nations, and religions. As Assmann summarizes this distinction:

> Cultural memory, then, is based on two separate functions: the presentation of a narrow selection of sacred texts, artistic masterpieces, or historic key events in a timeless framework; the storing of documents and artifacts of the past that do not at all meet these standards but are nevertheless deemed interesting or important enough to not let them vanish on the highway to total oblivion.
>
> (A. Assmann 2008: 101)

As the case of Morrison's canonical novel will demonstrate, an important aspect of the work of cultural memory involves the reframing of the archive through the resuscitation of marginal traces, voices, and narratives.

In the most recent, "third stage" of memory studies, which dates from the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars put even greater emphasis on the dynamics of memory: on the interplay between communicative and cultural forms, canons and archives, the central and the marginal, and different media. Indeed, in recent work, cultural memory has lost the strict association with the canon found in the Assmanns' work and has come to take on the more heterogeneous notion of culture associated with work in cultural studies. For Rigney, "'cultural remembrance' ... designate[s] the complex set of mnemonic practices through which collective views of the past are continuously being shaped, circulated, reproduced, and (un)critically transformed with the help of media" (2009: 6). Literature plays a particular, but not unique role in Rigney's account; that is, it has particular affordances—imaginative narrative structures, possibilities for the cultivation of identification and empathy, etc.—that lend it power in performing the work of remembrance, but it should also be understood as one node in a broader network of mnemonic practices. For Rigney, literature is not a mere product; its meaning- and memory-making potentials are always in process and embedded in larger social processes of circulation and reception. She identifies "five interrelated roles played by literature in the performance of cultural memory" (2008: 350). Literary works function as: "*relay stations*" that "build on or recycle earlier forms of remembrance"; "*stabilizers*" that "provide a cultural frame for later recollections" by virtue of their "sticking power";

"*catalysts*" that draw attention to 'new' topics or ones hitherto neglected"; "*objects of recollection*" that are themselves remembered; and "*calibrators*" or "canonical literary 'monuments'" that are subject to revision and rewriting, as in the postcolonial practice of "writing back" (350–352).

Along with her frequent collaborator Astrid Erll, Rigney emphasizes that the roles literature plays in the performance of cultural memory function most powerfully because of their placement within intermedial networks. In other words, memories have staying power "in the public arena and *become* collective" because they pass through multiple media forms (Erll and Rigney 2009: 2). To give a not entirely arbitrary example, newspaper articles may serve as the source for novels, novels may become films or graphic novels, and so forth. Here, Erll and Rigney adapt Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of "remediation," which describes the way all media forms reconfigure and revise other media forms (e.g. websites mimic newspapers; films mimic television formats [see Bolter and Grusin]). Erll and Rigney thus argue that "just as there is no cultural memory prior to mediation there is no mediation without remediation: all representations of the past draw on available media technologies, on existent media products, on patterns of representation and medial aesthetics" (4).

The categories offered by the Assmanns, Rigney, and Erll provide useful tools for understanding the memory work of *Beloved* and the prominence it has achieved as a paradigm-defining text. Morrison's novel stages the move from archive to canon, the passage from communicative to cultural memory, and it is itself embedded in the dynamics of remediation. Furthermore, the novel's status as a "hyper-canonical" text—a concept developed by Jonathan Arac in a discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* (1997)—derives, at least in part, from its remarkable performance of all the roles Rigney identifies in addition to its obvious literary virtuosity. Indeed, like Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, with its discourse on voluntary and involuntary memory, *Beloved* performs an additional role that does not quite fit into Rigney's catalogue: it offers a theorization of memory as "rememory" that has influenced scholars as well as other writers.

From the Archive to the Poetics of Cultural Memory

Beloved's work of memory takes place on multiple levels—within the text, at its paratextual margins, and beyond its pages. If we can locate an origin to the novel's contribution, however, it would reside in its movement from archive to canon—an almost literal enactment of Aleida Assmann's account of the two primary components of cultural memory and one that also casts light on Morrison's institutional role as an agent of public remembrance. From 1967 to 1983, Morrison served as an editor at Random House, a role she used to bring visibility to numerous Black writers. In the course of her tenure there, she also helped publish *The Black Book*, a documentary collection

traversing nearly 350 years of the "black experience in America," as the publishers put it. Produced by amateur historians and collectors, *The Black Book* is an example of the kind of "improper history" to which Rigney refers in describing how professional historians have lost their monopoly on narrating the past. Devoid of a table of contents or index, the work serves more as a sourcebook for cultural memory than as a work of historiography—though it certainly intervenes in dominant perceptions of US history. And indeed, Morrison treats the work as an archive for her mnemonic imagination.

While Morrison alludes to a Gwendolyn Brooks poem included in *The Black Book* in her earlier novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), the collection proves essential to *Beloved* and key to understanding its work of memory (see Rambsy 2015). Appearing on p. 10 of the collection is the facsimile of an 1856 newspaper article from the *American Baptist* called "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child" (Harris 2019: 10; cf. also Mobley 1993; Weisenburger 1998; Reinhardt 2010). "A Visit" recounts the story of Margaret Garner, a mother who had escaped from enslavement and who had killed her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Mary so that she would not be returned to slavery.[4] Garner's story caused a sensation and led to vigorous debates about slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act, which lay behind the case. In the midst of the attention created by Garner's case, "many antislavery commentators believed that the woman who had triggered so substantial a dispute was assured a permanent and prominent place in American political memory" (Reinhardt 2010: x). Yet, as Mark Reinhardt points out in an extensive study of the case, "these observers were wrong: Margaret Garner did not become an enduring household name or even one of the nation's minor political icons. At least as a matter of public discourse, the case faded into obscurity soon after the Civil War" (Reinhardt 2010: x). Only Morrison's remediation of the newspaper article in the form of a novel brought Garner back to public consciousness. As Reinhardt documents, despite its inclusion in *The Black Book*, the "story remained largely forgotten until 1987" with the publication of *Beloved* (Reinhardt 2010: x; see also Weisenburger 1998: 10). Morrison's recasting of Garner's story—which she situates in an imaginative, fictional framework centered on the protagonist Sethe and her murdered daughter Beloved—thus illustrates powerfully Rigney's description of literary texts as "catalysts" that bring "new" stories (back) into public memory; and it does so precisely by mining the archive and recirculating that "passive" piece of evidence constituted by the 1856 newspaper article. In Mobley's words, "*Beloved* dramatizes the complex relationship between history and memory by shifting from lived experience as documented in *The Black Book* to remembered experience as represented in the novel" (1993: 357). We can measure the success of *Beloved*'s role as a memory catalyst—and indeed its assumption of hyper-canonical status—in part by the fact that Margaret Garner is now a household name, at least in certain realms of the university and public sphere.

Although drawing on a key historical source, and certainly enriched by deep historical understanding of nineteenth-century US history, *Beloved* is most definitely not a

[4] For extended accounts of the Margaret Garner story, see Weisenburger (1998) and Reinhardt (2010).

historical novel. When Morrison describes her motivation and method in relation to Garner's story, she typically emphasizes the limits of the archive as a source of living history. Not simply the newspaper account, but also the entire genre of the nineteenth-century slave narrative fails to provide the kind of subjective, emotional evidence that Morrison desires. As she writes in a 2004 preface appended to recent editions of the novel:

> The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's "place."
>
> (2004: xvii)

Because of Morrison's commitment to linking history with the contemporary and with subjective experience, I would categorize *Beloved* not as a historical novel but rather as a "memory novel."[5] We know this not just because of what Morrison says outside the text but primarily because of the way she retells Garner's story—not in a strictly realist, historicist mode but rather in the gothic genre of the ghost story and through the lens of multiple characters who look back at slavery from the novel's 1873 present. *Beloved* is less the story of Margaret Garner than the story of our haunting by her story—or perhaps, better, by the way we *should* be haunted by her story but have not yet been. The return of the murdered child Beloved, first as a spectral but aggressive presence in Sethe and Denver's house and then as an embodied character who resides with them, allegorizes the return of Garner's story in the novel as "remembered experience" (Mobley 1993) and as the "grounds of memory" (Best 2012)—in short, as cultural memory and not as history. The figure of the ghost lies at the center of Morrison's poetics of memory—her textual staging of varieties of remembrance and forgetting—and, especially, her conceptualization of memory as rememory.

"Rememory" emerges from Sethe's vernacular language of remembrance but serves as a key for understanding the novel's poetics and has subsequently entered into the theoretical lexicon of memory studies. Although rememory is associated with Sethe, it is introduced in a chapter focalized through her daughter Denver, who was literally born on the border between slave-holding and free states and whose experience of enslavement derives entirely from the stories she has been told by her elders. Indeed, the section leading to Sethe's "theory" of rememory begins when Denver perceives a ghost: looking through the window of their haunted house, Denver

> saw her mother on her knees in prayer, which was not unusual. What was unusual (even for a girl who had lived all her life in a house peopled by the living activity of

[5] On the historical novel, see Lukács (1963) and Anderson (2011). "Memory novel" is my own term and has not been used extensively to my knowledge.

> the dead) was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist.
>
> (Morrison 2004: 35)

The vision triggers a memory for Denver—that of her own birth—which she knows through her mother's narration, but which she knows so intensely that she is able to "ste[p] into the told story" (36), a story that then unfolds as if the reader were witnessing it in the present (36–42). When the birth narrative ends and we return to the novel's present, Denver enters the house and tells Sethe about her vision of the white dress. At this point, Sethe explains what she was thinking as she knelt next to the ghost:

> I was thinking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it is gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.
>
> (2004: 43)

A rememory, in Sethe's account, is not personal property, but rather collective memory: anyone can

> bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.... The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.
>
> (43–44)

Drawing out the consequences, Denver replies, "If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies" (44). Sethe—or Morrison—may seem to literalize Nora's contemporaneous notion of *lieux de mémoire* in this passage, but in fact the novel's conception goes beyond his binary framework. Rather than polarizing history and memory or "true" and artificial forms of remembrance, the notion of rememory brings together milieus and sites of memory, personal and collective remembrance, and communicative and cultural memory in an amalgam that has since become central to the "third stage" of memory studies. In particular, *Beloved* resonates with recent interest in transgenerational memory and in what Alison Landsberg calls "prosthetic memories," memories that are adopted by someone who, in Sethe's terms, "never was there" (see Hirsch 2012; Landsberg 2004; for a critique, see Michaels 1996).

The power of memory to disrupt the present—figured both in the ghost and in the externalized force of rememory as something you can "bump into"—also explains why forgetting is a powerful force in the novel. Sethe tries "keeping the past at bay" (Morrison 2004: 51), while Paul D attempts to lock it up "in a tobacco tin buried in

his chest" (86). And yet, despite these efforts at forgetting, the temptation to "[t]rust things and remember things" (21) is also strong, as is the involuntary recall of frequently traumatic content. Sweet Home, the plantation from which Sethe and Paul D escaped, appears "suddenly ... rolling, rolling, rolling out before [Sethe's] eyes"—a vision of "shameless beauty," of "[b]oys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" (7). Later, Sethe "remember[s] something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind": her mother's commission of infanticide (71). Likewise, an intimate encounter with Beloved erodes Paul D's tobacco tin lid (136). The novel's commitment to rewriting nineteenth-century accounts of enslavement from a subject-centered, presentist perspective does not, in other words, entail a simple valuation of memory or of the direct continuity between past and present that Best finds in the *Beloved* paradigm. Rather, it seems to imply that ongoing, traumatic racial histories are too complex to fit neatly into the opposition between continuity and discontinuity.

Ultimately, this unstable oscillation between remembrance and forgetting may constitute the "content" of the novel. In its famous coda, the novel focalizes through a collective perspective, the subject of which is "everybody" in the community and by extension the community of readers. The coda unfolds a series of paradoxes or performative contradictions, culminating in the repeated declarations "It was not a story to pass on .... This is not a story to pass on" (323–324)—a double-coded sentence that implies both the need to forget and the need to remember. In a sense, the novel closes by returning to the problem of its beginnings: the relationship between archive and canon. The ghost of Beloved has been exorcised and has disappeared; with her has gone the memory of the margins of the history of slavery and the Middle Passage, which Morrison hints at throughout in opaque references and passages. Yet, paradoxically, in intoning a discourse of forgetting in the coda—and indeed throughout the novel—Morrison also places the "disremembered" at the heart of an emergent cultural memory:

> By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.
>
> (324)

In a significant sense, traces of the dead—and especially the dead of the Middle Passage—may be irrecoverably lost, but *Beloved* brings us closer to the traumatic past than we were before and it does so, in part, by recovering and remediating the archival trace of Margaret Garner. At least at the textual level, the novel's hauntology challenges both the presence of the present and the absence of the past; the ghost and her disappearance leave us haunted but unsure of what remains of the slave past and of how to situate ourselves in its wake. By speaking of the "unaccounted," *Beloved* begins a necessary, non-redemptive process of accounting.

Beloved's Afterlives and the Discourse of Cultural Memory

Beloved is not just a brilliant novel about time and memory but a brilliant novel about memory that appeared at the right time. While the novel's textual discourse presents a rich and unsettling account of what is retained and what is lost from the past, its enunciation takes part in the wider turn toward cultural memory that Rigney associates with the unsettling of disciplinary history. This wider context helps explain and situate the paradigmatic nature of *Beloved*'s influence. The publication of the novel occurred at a significant moment in a global conversation about multiple (most often traumatic) pasts. In addition to appearing two years before Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire* was translated into English, *Beloved* appeared at a moment during which public memories of the Holocaust and other histories of violence were experiencing exponential growth. The year before *Beloved* appeared, Art Spiegelman published the first volume of his graphic, second-generation Holocaust memoir *Maus*. Plans were already well underway for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, which would open in the nation's capital in 1993; Germany had just emerged from a major public debate about responsibility for the Nazi past (the *Historikerstreit*); South Africa was about to undergo its remarkable transition, which famously involved public accounting for past violence through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and the end of the Cold War would soon recalibrate memories of Europe's twentieth century—to name only a few relevant examples. Although the histories evoked here are heterogeneous, the moment of the late 1980s/early 1990s was precisely a time in which these histories resonated together and were perceived by some as components of a new "cosmopolitan memory" (cf. Levy and Sznaider 2005).

There are at least two different ways that *Beloved* intersects with this moment of transnational memory culture. First, Morrison seems to evoke memory of the Holocaust in the novel's powerful dedication: "Sixty Million/and more." While radically underdetermined in content, the particular number Morrison chooses—along with the implicit reference to the dead of the system of enslavement and the Middle Passage—has evoked for many a particular *lieu de mémoire*: the figure "6,000,000," the conventionally referenced number of Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide. While there may be an element of competitive upping of the ante in this dedicatory gesture, we can also read it as an attempt to place memory of slavery alongside memory of the Holocaust in a multidirectional juxtaposition of divergent histories at a moment when global memory cultures were increasingly coming into contact in public debate and culture (see Rothberg 2009).[6]

[6] The critic Stanley Crouch (1987) provided a less generous evaluation of this element of Beloved when he infamously described the text as a "blackface holocaust novel." Employing the precise vocabulary of competitive memory that I criticize in *Multidirectional Memory*, Crouch continues: "It

In addition to evoking the Holocaust at a moment when its memory was undergoing transformation and expansion, *Beloved* connects to larger transformations in memory culture and memory studies scholarship. In particular, it powerfully evokes issues of intergenerational transmission common to many traumatic histories. For the Holocaust, the 1980s was a moment when a discourse on the transition from living witnesses to future generations of secondary witnesses emerged as scholars and community organizations worried about what would happen when no more survivors were present to tell their stories. While transatlantic slavery ended decades before the Holocaust, it also—perhaps surprisingly—can be seen as lying on the cusp of transition from communicative to cultural memory. For instance, in *Lose Your Mother*, a text marked by *Beloved's* influence, Saidiya Hartman recounts hearing about her great-great grandmother Ella, who was born in slavery, from her great-grandfather, although the details she garners remain sparse. As she writes, "The gaps and silences of my family were not unusual: slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable" (2007: 13–14). What Hartman describes here might be understood as the outer limit of what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," the partially and often indirectly evoked, but still affectively powerful versions of the past received by descendants of victims of traumatic violence. While Hirsch has generally, though not exclusively, focused on postmemories of the Holocaust, a fact shaped by autobiography as well as scholarly interest, she also recounts how "Toni Morrison's visit to Dartmouth and her public reading of the first chapter of *Beloved* a full year before the novel's publication" catalyzed her thinking on "the subject of memory and transmission." For Hirsch, Morrison's novel "dramatized the haunting, transgenerational reach of trauma, and it showed me that latency need not mean forgetting or oblivion. Generations after slavery, Morrison was able to convey its impacts and effects more powerfully than contemporary accounts." The concept of postmemory, developed in the wake of that moment in an essay on *Maus*, was, Hirsch remarks, "the story of Denver in the novel, as it is the story of Spiegelman's Artie. In some ways, I began to acknowledge, it is my story as well" (2012: 11). If Hirsch's response is highly personal, it also reveals how tightly *Beloved* fits into a larger paradigm not only of slavery's enduring presence but also of the transgenerational transmission of trauma *tout court*. That paradigm is, in turn, conceivable as part of a larger shift that brought memory culture into prominence and that Andreas Huyssen explains as an effect of a media- and globalization-driven transformation in "our ways of thinking and living temporality" (2003: 4).

The mass media and processes of remediation have certainly contributed to the canonization of *Beloved*—one thinks not only of the Oprah-produced film but also of Morrison's several appearances on Oprah's Book Club (though not for *Beloved*!). But I would wager that the clearest signals of the novel's influence have remained textual

seems to be written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest." While I do find Morrison's dedication pointed, the notion that the novel is a "blackface" rewriting of a Holocaust text strikes me as a gross exaggeration that misses precisely the overlapping traumas of these certainly very different histories.

and pedagogical—a fascinating testament to the ongoing presence of canonical textual culture in a post-literary world. In addition to its regular appearance on syllabi at the secondary and tertiary levels, *Beloved* appears regularly within a wide range of other literary texts. Intertextuality, that is, functions as a literary afterlife that parallels the ghostly return of Garner's story within the novel. Here, we turn from *Beloved*'s role as what Rigney calls "catalyzer" and "relay station" to the roles of "stabilizer," "object of recollection," and "calibrator."

We glimpse this intertextual afterlife in a range of texts; first of all, those that grapple with the legacies of chattel slavery in the Americas. When Hartman declares her family's past as "unknown and unspeakable," for example, we may hear an echo of another famous line from *Beloved* that introduces the most experimental portion of the novel, which consists of a series of monologues touching precisely on what remains "unknown and unspeakable" in slavery's traumatic legacies:

> When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds.
>
> Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken.
>
> (Morrison 2004: 235)

A significant strand of African American and Black diasporic writing since *Beloved* takes up this imperative to speak the unspoken, albeit in a way that, like Morrison's novel, continues to mark the gaps, silences, and traumatic ruptures transmitted into the present. In addition to Hartman's generically unclassifiable writings, a similar sensibility haunts Christina Sharpe's book-length essay *In the Wake* (2016). Sharpe makes frequent reference to *Beloved* and adapts one of its central categories—the "weather"—from the final passage of the novel, a demonstration that the conceptual tools offered by the novel are not limited to the notion of rememory. In fiction, we find *Beloved*'s influence in works of very different genres. Just in the last decade, we might point to N.K. Jemisin's speculative fiction *The Fifth Season* (2015), Yaa Gyasi's transnational, multigenerational family saga *Homegoing* (2017), and Jesmyn Ward's ghost-haunted, very contemporary *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), in which the slave plantation is rewritten as Mississippi's infamous State Penitentiary, the Parchman Farm.

Beloved's afterlives do not end with their appearance in works treating American slavery and its impact nor, as the examples chosen so far indicate, do they stop at the genre boundary of the novel. This fact helps us see that the *Beloved* paradigm identified by Best does not limit itself to the presence of the slave past but actually emerges out of larger shifts of the sort tracked by scholars in memory studies. Viet Thanh Nguyen, for example, gave the title *Nothing Ever Dies* to his award-winning study of the Vietnamese and American memory of war in Vietnam (2016a). He thus makes direct reference to the "rememory" passage, a passage that also serves as an epigraph and which Nguyen discusses within the text as an example of a "memory that inflicts physical and psychic

blows" (65). His novel *The Sympathizer*, a noir-ish spy thriller about a Vietnamese communist sleeper agent in southern California in the 1970s, does not much resemble *Beloved* formally, but, like Nguyen's scholarly study, it also makes reference to the fact that "[w]ars never die" (2016b: 235) and it includes a ghost that continually reminds the narrator of his participation in an act of deadly violence (otherwise very different from Sethe's).

As Nguyen's transnational study and novel suggest, the influence of *Beloved* does not stop at national borders either. Jennifer Gully and Lynn Mie Itagaki, for instance, find a reference to Morrison in Jenny Erpenbeck's best-selling 2015 novel about refugees in Germany *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*). In the novel, a retired classics professor becomes more and more involved with a community of African refugees in Berlin. At one point, he reflects that:

> all the men he's gotten to know here ... could just as easily be lying at the bottom of the Mediterranean. And conversely all the Germans who were murdered during the so-called Third Reich still inhabit Germany as ghosts, sometimes he even imagines that all these missing people along with their unborn children and the children of their children are walking beside him on the street, on their way to work or to visit friends, they sit invisibly in the cafés, take walks, go shopping, visit parks and the theater.
>
> (221–222; cited in Gully and Itagaki 2020: 267)

Not only does Erpenbeck offer here a consummate example of multidirectional memory but she also, in Gully and Itagaki's reading, uses the figure of "living among ghosts of the dead" to allude to "Toni Morrison's concept of 'rememory.' ... Both African chattel slavery and current African migration to Europe have resulted in too many unmourned deaths and few, if any, permanent memorials" (2020: 268).[7] This "unspoken" link between unmourned refugee deaths in the Mediterranean and the unmourned dead of slavery and the Middle Passage becomes explicit in Sharpe's *In the Wake*, where it figures centrally as evidence of the ongoing structuring anti-Blackness of modernity.

As this small selection of heterogeneous examples begins to suggest, the *Beloved* paradigm has gone global in decades following its publication. The frequent reference to Morrison's novel in such heterogeneous contexts confirms Yogita Goyal's claim in an important study that Atlantic slavery has become a "defining template" that "frames a range of contemporary phenomena across the globe" (2019: 2). *Beloved* and the many neo-slave narratives Goyal discusses help us understand the central role that the afterlives of slavery play in the dynamics of contemporary memory and human rights cultures. Memory studies, in turn, helps us understand the dynamics of canonization

[7] Whether or not Gully and Itagaki are correct that this is a direct reference to "rememory," it remains a mark of *Beloved*'s influence in conceptualizations of memory that, for critics and readers alike, embodied, ghost-like memory now often calls up Morrison's internationally famous work.

that have helped transform a novel into a paradigm and it helps us place the questions Goyal considers within an even more encompassing global memory culture.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from this account of a singular canonical—even hypercanonical—novel? The story told about *Beloved* here is not reproducible for all "memory novels," no less all works of twentieth-century American literature. Yet, the case does help illuminate general methodological tools for bringing literary studies and memory studies together. It also brings into view larger shifts in the experience of history and temporality that may be helpful for thinking about twentieth-century literary history in new ways. The field of memory studies orients us toward both textual and contextual features of literary meaning: both the way literary works help us conceptualize individual and collective memory and the way that the cultural dynamics of remembrance inflect our engagement with literary works. Although it can be challenging to practice in the classroom, Rigney's focus on the afterlives of literary works as vectors of cultural memory offers a methodology that emphasizes the social value of literary production and literary study.[8] Many aspects of this methodology are not unique to the field of memory studies, which shares concerns with broad currents in cultural studies, book history, media studies, and more. Yet, as the case of *Beloved*'s immense influence suggests, a focus on cultural memory is not simply an "add on." The dynamics of memory are a central feature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century national and transnational cultures.

The case of *Beloved* helps us see that if memory in both its individual and collective forms is a perennial topic of literature, it has also become an urgent matter of public concern in recent decades. As the worldwide toppling of monuments to racist and colonialist pasts demonstrates, the stakes of remembrance are social and political as well as cultural. #Black Lives Matter and contemporary abolitionist movements draw at least some of their energies from an implicit understanding of the *Beloved* paradigm. Seeking not reform but "abolition" ("the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism"), these movements argue, in Hartman's terms, that "[w]hat is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference" (Hartman 2020). The translation of the language of abolition into contemporary contexts demonstrates how activists and intellectuals set political memory in opposition to material continuities. Whether or not the connection to Morrison's work is conscious or explicit, the movement feeds on the temporal short-circuit that Best excavates (and criticizes): the connections presumed between, for instance, eighteenth- and

[8] For the fullest version of Rigney's method, see her study *The Afterlives of Walter Scott* (2012).

nineteenth-century slave patrols and the contemporary policing of communities of color.[9]

I would not argue that a memory-inflected literary studies should lead this conversation about abolition, but I believe it has something valuable to contribute. It might highlight the more complex logic of continuity and discontinuity that Morrison's novel actually depicts at the textual level (e.g. "This is not a story to pass on"), and it might bring into view the larger social frameworks (*les cadres sociaux*) that make claims for continuity and discontinuity legible. By illuminating these social frameworks (for instance, the prevalence of concerns about intergenerational transmission and the passage from communicative to cultural memory), the field of memory studies reveals how remembrance of slavery intersects with remembrance of the Holocaust, the US–Vietnam War, apartheid, and many other politically consequential traumatic histories.

Beloved does not simply reflect larger trends, however. As a catalyst and calibrator of memory, it has helped set the terms of public debate about the hold of the past on the present. A canonical late-twentieth-century novel that mines the archive of mid-nineteenth-century history, *Beloved*'s afterlives remain active in the twenty-first century. The unfinished project of abolition it narrates reminds us of the work that remains to be done.

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[9] For a scholarly tracking of these continuities, see Browne (2015).

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